**IN THE UNITED STATES PATENT AND TRADEMARK OFFICE
ON APPEAL FROM THE EXAMINER TO THE BOARD
OF PATENT APPEALS AND INTERFERENCES**

In re Application of:	Edward J. Stashluk, Jr. et al
U.S. Patent Serial No.:	10/697,485
Filing Date:	October 30, 2003
Group No.:	3625
Examiner:	Michael Misiaszek
Confirmation No.	7404
Title:	MERCHANDISE RETURN SYSTEM WITH VALUE ADDED RETURNS PROCESSING (DATA COMMUNICATIONS)

MAIL STOP APPEAL BRIEF - PATENT
Commissioner for Patents
P.O. Box 1450
Alexandria, Virginia 22313-1450

Dear Sir:

APPEAL BRIEF

Appellants have appealed to the Board of Patent Appeals and Interferences ("Board") from the Final Office Action dated January 5, 2007. Appellants filed a Notice of Appeal and Pre-Appeal Brief Request for Review on April 3, 2007 with the statutory fee of $250.00. Appellants received a Notice of Panel Decision from Pre-Appeal Brief Review dated April 12, 2007, rejecting Claims 1, 3-6, and 33-46.

Real Party In Interest

This Application is currently owned by Newgistics, Inc. as indicated by:

an assignment recorded on 05/26/2004 from inventors Edward J. Stashluk, Jr., Michael J. Stevens, Jennifer A. Milch, Phillip J. Sidari, Terry Combs, and Douglas J. Kern to Newgistics, Inc., in the Assignment Records of the PTO at Reel 015380, Frame 0748 (6 pages).

Related Appeals and Interferences

To the knowledge of Appellants' counsel, there are no known interferences or judicial proceedings that will directly affect or be directly affected by or have a bearing on the Board's decision regarding this Appeal.

Status of Claims

Claims 1, 3-6, and 33-46 are pending in this Application and stand rejected pursuant to a Final Office Action mailed January 5, 2007 ("Final Office Action") and an Advisory Action mailed March 19, 2007 ("Advisory Action").

Claims 1, 3, 33, 34, and 38-46 stand rejected under 35 U.S.C. § 103(a) as being unpatentable over U.S. Patent No. 6,536,659 issued to Hauser et al. ("*Hauser*") in view of "Cattron Acquires Theimeg"; Modern Materials Handling; Boston; October 2000 ("*ReturnValet1*") and U.S. Patent Application Publication No. 2004/0172260 issued to Junger et al. ("*Junger*"). Claims 4-6 and 35-37 stand rejected under 35 U.S.C. § 103(a) as being unpatentable over *Hauser* in view of *ReturnValet1* and *Junger* as applied to Claims 3 and 34 above, and further in view of "J. Crew Selects Newgistics' ReturnValet Service for Managing Product Returns," Business Editors, Business Wire; January 14, 2002 ("*ReturnValet2*").

All pending claims are shown in Appendix A, attached hereto, along with an indication of the status of those claims. A copy of *Hauser* is attached as Appendix B, a copy of *ReturnValet1* is attached as Appendix C, a copy of *Junger* is attached as Appendix D, and *ReturnValet2* is attached as Appendix E.

Status of Amendments

All amendments submitted by Appellants have been entered by the Examiner.

Summary of Claimed Subject Matter

This invention described herein is a merchandising method and system that permits a merchant to provide pre-authorized returns, for which the customer need not pay shipping charges. The merchant provides a special return label to the customer, which has machine readable data that enables shipping charges to be assessed at a point of delivery. Data on the return label may further ensure that the package is delivered to an initial point of return close to the customer, thereby providing "reverse zone skipping". The return label may further have data that permits the merchant to dynamically route returned packages and that permits both the merchant and the customer to be quickly notified of the status of the return. (Page 7, lines 2-15.)

Once a package is received at a returns center, the label is scanned, or otherwise electronically read, and compared to stored data that includes various "rules" associated with each merchant. A processing system is used to link each return package to its associated rules, and to provide various value added services, such as notice to the merchant and/or the customer and dispositioning of the item. (Page 7, lines 16-23.)

The method is used by, or on behalf of, a "merchant", which is typically a retail merchant. However, the concepts discussed herein may be applied to any merchant, including service providers who sell goods incidentally to the providing of services. The "return" may be for purposes of receiving credit for an item recently purchased, but may also be subsequent to events such as warranty claims, recalls, or for repairs. (Page 7, lines 24-31.)

The method described herein may be used in connection with a "reverse logistics return service". This type of service is becoming increasingly popular, and permits merchants to "outsource" their returns process. For purposes of this description, these service providers are referred to as "returns providers". They typically provide returns services for a number of different merchants, with part of their services being disposing of packages in accordance with the particular disposition rules of each merchant. (Page 8, lines 1-10.)

If the merchant uses such a returns provider, the returns label will further have data useful for identifying each merchant and may contain other data particular to that merchant. However, the methods described herein are also useful for returns systems that handle only returns for a single merchant, such as for a merchant having an in-house returns provider. (Page 8, lines 11-17.)

One example of a returns service that could incorporate use of the return label described herein is the SmartLabel™ service offered by Newgistics, Inc. This service makes use of a bar-coded shipping label, typically attached to an invoice received by the customer when the product is delivered to the customer. To return the product, the customer simply affixes the label to the return package, and drops the package anywhere into the U.S. Postal System (USPS), such as by dropping it into a mailbox. The label directs the package to a returns center maintained by the service provider. The returns provider assesses shipping charges, pays the carrier, and passes the shipping costs on to the merchant, who may then deduct those costs from the customer's credit for the returned item. The various services that the returns provider provides to the merchant include the return label, aggregation of packages to each merchant, transportation and processing services, payment of shipping charges, reporting, and notifications to the merchant and/or the customer. (Page 8, line 18 - Page 9, line 5.)

For purposes of example herein, it is assumed that the carrier that ships the returned items is the United States Postal Service. However, the same concepts could be applied to a returns process that uses other carriers or multiple carriers, so long as each carrier has the equivalent of postage due capability, that is, the ability to collect shipping charges after the package is delivered, that is, from the returns provider (the package recipient) rather than from the customer. (Page 9, lines 6-14.)

With regard to the independent claims currently under Appeal, Appellants provide the following concise explanation of the subject matter recited in the claim elements. For brevity, Appellants do not necessarily identify every portion of the Specification and drawings relevant to the recited claim elements. Additionally, this explanation should not be used to limit Appellants' claims but is intended to assist the Board in considering the Appeal of this Application.

For example, independent Claim 1 recites the following:

A method, performed by a returns provider, of handling customer returns of items on behalf of multiple merchants, (e.g., Figures 1 and 6-7; *Specification,* page 7, line 2 through page 14, line 10), comprising the steps of:

storing a set of merchant returns rules in a processing system, such that a set of returns rules is associated with each merchant (e.g., Figure 1; *Specification,* page 7, lines 24-31; page 25, line 18 through page 26, line 5; pages 30-36);

maintaining a plurality of regional returns centers (e.g., Figures 7 and 8; *Specification,* page 23, line 1 through page 24, line 22);

receiving, by carrier delivery, packages containing returned items at a selected one of the regional returns centers (e.g., Figure 1, step 112; *Specification,* page 11, lines 20-27);

wherein affixed to each package is a printed label, the label having machine readable data representing at least the identification of a merchant associated with the returned item, the printed label including a destination address associated with the selected one of the regional returns centers, the selected one of the regional returns centers selected for carrier delivery of the package because the selected one of the regional returns centers is geographically closer to a location of a customer from which the package is received than others of the plurality of regional returns centers (e.g., Figures 1 and 2; Figure 6; *Specification,* page 8, lines 11-17; page 10, line 24 through page 11, line 12; page 11, line 28 through page 12, line 14; page 14, line 12 through page 17, line 2; page 24, lines 11-22);

scanning the machine readable data on each package (e.g., Figure; *Specification,* page 7, lines 16-23; page 24, line 22 through page 25, line 3);

correlating at least a portion of the machine readable data with a set of returns rules (e.g., Figure 6, step 61; *Specification,* page 22, lines 14-30; page 23, line 29 through page 24, line 10; page 24, line 22 through page 24, line 3); and

notifying the merchant of a returned package, based on the results of the correlating step (e.g., *Specification,* page 13, lines 5-11; page 26, line 6 through page 27, line 32).

As another example, independent Claim 33 recites the following:

A method, performed by a returns provider, of handling customer returns of items on behalf of at least one merchant (e.g., Figures 1 and 6-7; *Specification,* page 7, line 2 through page 14, line 10), comprising the steps of:

maintaining a plurality of regional return centers for the processing of the return of items on behalf of at least one merchant (e.g., Figures 7 and 8; *Specification,* page 23, line 1 through page 24, line 22);

receiving a package containing at least one returned item at a selected one of the plurality of regional returns centers (e.g., Figure 1, step 112; *Specification,* page 11, lines 20-27), the package comprising:

a printed carrier label, the carrier label comprising a destination address associated with the selected regional returns center, the selected one of the regional returns centers selected for carrier delivery of the package because the selected one of the regional returns centers is geographically closer to a location of a customer from which the package is received than others of the plurality of regional returns centers (e.g., Figures 1 and 2; Figure 6; *Specification,* page 8, lines 11-17; page 10, line 24 through page 11, line 12; page 11, line 28 through page 12, line 14; page 14, line 12 through page 17, line 2; page 24, lines 11-22); and

transaction specific machine readable data (e.g., Figures 1 and 2; Figure 6; *Specification,* page 8, lines 11-17; page 10, line 24 through page 11, line 12; page 11, line 28 through page 12, line 14; page 14, line 12 through page 17, line 2; page 24, lines 11-22);

scanning the machine readable data on each package (e.g., Figure; *Specification,* page 7, lines 16-23; page 24, line 22 through page 25, line 3); and

correlating at least a portion of the machine readable data with a set of returns rules to be used in the processing of the at least one returned item (e.g., Figure 6, step 61; *Specification,* page 22, lines 14-30; page 23, line 29 through page 24, line 10; page 24, line 22 through page 24, line 3).

In this Appeal Brief, Appellants have argued certain dependent claims separately. With regard to these dependent claims, Appellants provide the following concise explanation of the subject matter recited in the claim elements. For brevity, Appellants do not necessarily identify every portion of the Specification and drawings relevant to the recited claim elements. Additionally, this explanation should not be used to limit Appellants' claims but is intended to assist the Board in considering the Appeal of this Application.

For example, dependent Claim 4 recites the following:

the purchase transaction is represented by an invoice number (e.g., Figure 3; *Specification,* page 16, lines 3-14; page 17, lines 9-16; page 18, lines 7-15).

Dependent Claim 35 recites certain similar features and operations.

As another example, dependent Claim 5 recites the following:

the purchase transaction is represented by a customer number (e.g., *Specification,* page 16, lines 3-14; page 17, lines 9-16; page 18, lines 7-15).

Dependent Claim 36 recites certain similar features and operations.

As another example, dependent Claim 6 recites the following:

the purchase transaction is represented by a product number (e.g., *Specification,* page 16, lines 3-14; page 17, lines 9-16; page 18, lines 7-15).

Dependent Claim 37 recites certain similar features and operations.

Grounds of Rejection to be Reviewed on Appeal

Are Claims 1, 3, 33, 34, and 38-46 unpatentable under 35 U.S.C. § 103(a) over U.S. Patent No. 6,536,659 issued to Hauser et al. ("*Hauser*") in view of "Cattron Acquires Theimeg"; Modern Materials Handling; Boston; October 2000 ("*ReturnValet1*") and U.S. Patent Application Publication No. 2004/0172260 issued to Junger et al. ("*Junger*")?

Are Claims 4-6 and 35-37 unpatentable under 35 U.S.C. § 103(a) over *Hauser* in view of *ReturnValet1* and *Junger* as applied to Claims 3 and 34 above, and further in view of "J. Crew Selects Newgistics' ReturnValet Service for Managing Product Returns," Business Editors, Business Wire; January 14, 2002 ("*ReturnValet2*")?

Arguments

Claims 1, 3, 33, 34, and 38-46 stand rejected under 35 U.S.C. § 103(a) as being unpatentable over *Hauser*) in view of *ReturnValet1* and *Junger*. Claims 4-6 and 35-37 stand rejected under 35 U.S.C. § 103(a) as being unpatentable over *Hauser* in view of *ReturnValet1* and *Junger* as applied to Claims 3 and 34 above, and further in view of *ReturnValet2*. Copies of *Hauser*, *ReturnValet1*, *Junger*, and *ReturnValet2* are attached in the Evidence Appendix. For the reasons discussed below, Appellants respectfully submit that these rejections are improper and should be reversed by the Board.

I. Standard under 35 U.S.C. § 103

The question raised under 35 U.S.C. § 103 is whether the prior art taken as a whole would suggest the claimed invention taken as a whole to one of ordinary skill in the art at the time of the invention. *See* 35 U.S.C. § 103(a). Accordingly, even if all elements of a claim are disclosed in various prior art references, which is certainly not the case here as discussed below, the claimed invention taken as a whole cannot be said to be obvious without some reason given in the prior art why one of ordinary skill in the art at the time of the invention would have been prompted to modify the teachings of a reference or combine the teachings of multiple references to arrive at the claimed invention.

The M.P.E.P. sets forth the strict legal standard for establishing a *prima facie* case of obviousness based on modification or combination of prior art references. "To establish a *prima facie* case of obviousness, three basic criteria must be met. First, there must be some suggestion or motivation, either in the references themselves or in the knowledge generally available to one of ordinary skill in the art, to modify the reference or combine reference teachings. Second, there must be a reasonable expectation of success. Finally, the prior art reference (or references where combined) must teach or suggest all the claim limitations." M.P.E.P. § 2142, 2143. The teaching, suggestion or motivation for the modification or combination and the reasonable expectation of success must both be found in the prior art and cannot be based on an Appellant's disclosure. *See Id.* (citations omitted). "Obviousness can only be established by combining or modifying the teachings of the prior art to produce the claimed invention where there is some teaching, suggestion, or motivation to do so found

either explicitly or implicitly in the references themselves or in the knowledge generally available to one of ordinary skill in the art" at the time of the invention. M.P.E.P. § 2143.01. Even the fact that references *can* be modified or combined does not render the resultant modification or combination obvious unless the prior art teaches or suggests the desirability of the modification or combination. *See Id.* (citations omitted). Moreover, "To establish *prima facie* obviousness of a claimed invention, all the claim limitations must be taught or suggested by the prior art. All words in a claim must be considered in judging the patentability of that claim against the prior art." M.P.E.P. § 2143.03 (citations omitted).

The governing Federal Circuit case law makes this strict legal standard even more clear.[1] According to the Federal Circuit, "a showing of a suggestion, teaching, or motivation to combine or modify prior art references is an essential component of an obviousness holding." *In re Sang-Su Lee*, 277 F.3d 1338, 1343, 61 U.S.P.Q.2d 1430, 1433 (Fed. Cir. 2002) (quoting *Brown & Williamson Tobacco Corp. v. Philip Morris Inc.*, 229 F.3d 1120, 1124-25, 56 U.S.P.Q.2d 1456, 1459 (Fed. Cir. 2000)). "Evidence of a suggestion, teaching, or motivation . . . may flow from the prior art references themselves, the knowledge of one of ordinary skill in the art, or, in some cases, the nature of the problem to be solved." *In re Dembiczak*, 175 F.3d 994, 999, 50 U.S.P.Q.2d 1614, 1617 (Fed. Cir. 1999). However, the "range of sources available . . . does not diminish the requirement for actual evidence." *Id.* Although a prior art device "may be capable of being modified to run the way the apparatus is claimed, there must be a suggestion or motivation in the reference to do so." *In re Mills*, 916 F.2d at 682, 16 U.S.P.Q.2d at 1432. *See also In re Rouffet,* 149 F.3d 1350, 1357, 47 U.S.P.Q.2d 1453, 1457-58 (Fed. Cir. 1998) (holding a *prima facie* case of obviousness not made where the combination of the references taught every element of the claimed invention but did not provide a motivation to combine); *In Re Jones*, 958 F.2d 347, 351, 21 U.S.P.Q.2d 1941, 1944 (Fed. Cir. 1992) ("Conspicuously missing from this record is any evidence, other than the PTO's speculation (if that can be called evidence) that one of ordinary skill in the herbicidal art would have been motivated to make the modification of the prior art salts necessary to arrive at" the claimed invention.). Even a determination that it would have been obvious to one of ordinary skill in the art at the time of the invention to try the proposed

[1] Note M.P.E.P. 2145 X.C. ("The Federal Circuit has produced a number of decisions overturning obviousness rejections due to a lack of suggestion in the prior art of the desirability of combining references.").

modification or combination is not sufficient to establish a *prima facie* case of obviousness. *See In re Fine*, 837 F.2d 1071, 1075, 5 U.S.P.Q.2d 1596, 1599 (Fed. Cir. 1988).

In addition, the M.P.E.P. and the Federal Circuit repeatedly warn against using an Appellants' disclosure as a blueprint to reconstruct the claimed invention. For example, the M.P.E.P. states, "The tendency to resort to 'hindsight' based upon applicant's disclosure is often difficult to avoid due to the very nature of the examination process. However, impermissible hindsight must be avoided and the legal conclusion must be reached on the basis of the facts gleaned from the prior art." M.P.E.P. § 2142. The governing Federal Circuit cases are equally clear. "A critical step in analyzing the patentability of claims pursuant to [35 U.S.C. § 103] is casting the mind back to the time of invention, to consider the thinking of one of ordinary skill in the art, guided only by the prior art references and the then-accepted wisdom in the field. . . . Close adherence to this methodology is especially important in cases where the very ease with which the invention can be understood may prompt one 'to fall victim to the insidious effect of a hindsight syndrome wherein that which only the invention taught is used against its teacher.'" *In re Kotzab,* 217 F.3d 1365, 1369, 55 U.S.P.Q.2d 1313, 1316 (Fed. Cir. 2000) (citations omitted). In *In re Kotzab*, the Federal Circuit noted that to prevent the use of hindsight based on the invention to defeat patentability of the invention, the court requires the Examiner to show a motivation to combine the references that create the case of obviousness. *See id. See also, e.g., Grain Processing Corp. v. American Maize-Products,* 840 F.2d 902, 907, 5 U.S.P.Q.2d 1788, 1792 (Fed. Cir. 1988). Similarly, in *In re Dembiczak*, the Federal Circuit reversed a finding of obviousness by the Board, explaining that the required evidence of such a teaching, suggestion, or motivation is essential to avoid impermissible hindsight reconstruction of an applicant's invention:

> Our case law makes clear that the best defense against the subtle but powerful attraction of hind-sight obviousness analysis is *rigorous application of the requirement for a showing of the teaching or motivation to combine prior art references*. Combining prior art references without evidence of such a suggestion, teaching, or motivation simply takes the inventor's disclosure as a blueprint for piecing together the prior art to defeat patentability—the essence of hindsight.

175 F.3d at 999, 50 U.S.P.Q.2d at 1617 (emphasis added) (citations omitted).

II. The References Cited by the Examiner

A. The *Hauser* Reference

Hauser relates to a method "for handling goods returned by customers of a plurality of different merchants. Merchants who have authorized return of merchandise transmit data identifying the customer and the merchandise to be returned to a central return facility for inclusion in a database. Customers of the merchants package the merchandise to be returned and are provided with a return authorization shipping label by the central return facility. This label includes a scannable bar code identifying the merchant and the customer. After the merchandise is received at the central returns facility, the scannable bar code is scanned so that the merchandise can be sorted by merchant, and the merchandise is then inspected to determine if the merchandise authorized for return has been received. If so, the appropriate merchant is advised, and the customer is electronically credited for return of the merchandise. A bar code tag is attached to the returned merchandise that has been received to facilitate automated sorting on a conveyer system. The merchandise is thus directed to a storage bin for temporary storage along with other merchandise designated for the same disposition. When a bin is full, the merchandise contained therein is disposed of as designated." (*Hauser,* Abstract).

B. The *ReturnValet1* Reference

ReturnValet1 is a news article discussing a service provided by the Assignee of this Application. The service called "ReturnValet" offers "direct-to-consumer merchants a more customer friendly and cost-effective way of handling product returns." (*ReturnValet1*, paragraph 3). Specifically, "ReturnValet (which operates for over 225 retailers, wholesalers, and manufacturers) enables consumers to go back to the online retailer where they bought the product, linking them to the Newgistics Web site, www.newgistics.com. There, the customer will receive information regarding the location of the nearest postal center where they can go and return the product - receiving instant credit." (*ReturnValet1*, paragraph 4).

C. The *Junger* Reference

Junger "relates to a computer based system that provides a method for real time data storage and retrieval for the purpose of verifying and validating sales transactions and product return/warranty repair eligibility." (*Junger,* page 1, paragraph 8). Specifically, "[o]nce a product is accepted for return by the reatiler, the retailer then typically returns the product to the manufacturer for credit. However, when the reatil store accepts a product return that does not comply with the manufacturer's return policy, problems result between the retailer and the manufacturer because the manufacturer will refuse or be reluctant to accept the returned product from the retailer. Moreover, significant time and expense is wasted when a retailer improperly accepts prducts for return that do not comply with the manufacturer's return policy. Often times the improperly returned products are shipped to the manufacturere and then are simply returned to the retailer after being rejected for return by the manufacturer. This results in significant wasted shipping charges and employee time in attempting to resolve such matters. This situation can also result in significant tension between the retailer and the manufacturer. In other words, when returns are not properly handled at the retail level, numerous problems result for the retailer and the manufacturer." (*Junger,* page 1, paragraph 11).

According to *Junger*, "in a physical retail store environment, when a customer returns a product with a receipt to the retail location, a retailer may look at the serial number on the receipt and compare it to the returned product. If the serial numbers match and if all other return conditions for the particular product are met, the return may be accepted. When a customer returns a product with no receipt, or a receipt that does not have a correct serial number, the retailer may search the local database for sale information concerning the specific item being returned. If no sale information is located (for instance if another retailer sold the product), the general database may be accessed and searched for sales information, and the return handled accordingly. Additionally, if the retail clerk is unfamiliar with the applicable return policy, the clerk may submit the product for return approval to obtain the necessary information on the product and make an appropriate determination as to whether the return should be accepted. If the product does not qualify for return, the invention enables

the sales clerk to provide other useful information or assistance to the person seeking the return, such as operating or hook-up instructions for the product, as well as information on locations for warranty or non-warranty service for the product." (*Junger,* page 4, paragraph 33).

"A computer system at a product return center location obtains identifying information for a product which is to be returned from a retailer to a manufacturer. In the disclosed example implementation, this identifying information is then submitted to a remote return approval computer system through the internet or the like. the return approval computer system may then utilize the identifying information to determine whether the returned product satisfies applicable return criteria. If so, the product is pre-approved for return. The product return location preferably obtains identifying information for a plurality of returned products at a time. In response to the product identifying information submitted by the product return location, the return approval location may provide a list of approved returns and unapproved returns, along with a return authorization number for a batch of approved returns. The product return location may then assemble the approved product returns from the regional return center as a batch, thereby reducing costs." (*Junger,* page 4, paragraph 34).

D. The *ReturnValet2* Reference

ReturnValet2 is a news article further discussing the "ReturnValet" service provided by the Assignee of this Application to J. Crew, "a leading multi-channel retailer for apparel and accessories." (*ReturnValet2*, paragraph 1). Specifically, "J. Crew will first deploy ReturnValet's "Quick Label" program, which includes a pre-paid and pre-addressed "smart" shipping label enclosed with customers' merchandise. Customers returning merchandise to J.Crew simply apply the label to their return package and drop it in the U.S. Postal System. The Quick Label also eliminates return merchandise authorizations, waiting in lines for mailing items and paying cash up front for product returns." (*ReturnValet2*, paragraph 3). "In a later phase, J. Crew will also offer its customers access to ReturnValet's nationwide network of convenient neighborhood pack and ship locations for customers who prefer to

hand off their merchandise to a person, get a credit receipt, and complete their return as they would in a store. Consumers shoudl bring their invoice or gift receipt with their merchandise. J. Crew will gain advance notification of incoming returns, expediting returns processing and credit and exchange transactions." (*ReturnValet2*, paragraph 4).

III. Claims 1, 3, 33, 34, and 38-46 are Allowable

In the Final Office Action, Claims 1, 3, 33, 34, and 38-46 are rejected over the proposed *Hauser-ReturnValet1-Junger* combination. First, Appellants contend that the proposed *Hauser-ReturnValet1-Junger* combination fails to teach, suggest, or disclose the combination of elements recited in Claims 1, 3, 33, 34, and 38-46. Second, Appellants contend that the proposed *Hauser-ReturnValet1-Junger* combination is improper as applied to Appellants' Claims 1, 3, 33, 34, and 38-46.

A. Claims 1, 3, 33, 34, and 38-46 are Allowable over the Cited References

Appellants' claims are allowable over the proposed *Hauser-ReturnValet1-Junger* combination because the proposed *Hauser-ReturnValet1-Junger* combination does not disclose, teach, or suggest the features and operations recited in Appellants' claims. For example, the proposed *Hauser-ReturnValet1-Junger* combination does not disclose, teach, or suggest at least the following features and operations recited Claim 1 of the present application:

> receiving, by carrier delivery, packages containing returned items at a selected one of the regional returns centers;
>
> wherein affixed to each package is a printed label, the label having machine readable data representing at least the identification of a merchant associated with the returned item, the printed label including a destination address associated with the selected one of the regional returns centers, the selected one of the regional returns centers selected for carrier delivery of the package because the selected one of the regional returns centers is geographically closer to a location of a customer from which the package is received than others of the plurality of regional returns centers . . .

In the Final Office Action, the Examiner relies upon *Hauser* for the operational step of receiving the package and for the printed label. (Final Office Action, page 3). The

Examiner relies upon *ReturnValet1* for disclosure of a plurality of regional return centers and upon *Junger* for disclosure of carrier delivery. (Final Office Action, page 4). Even if the references disclose what the Examiner purports that the references disclose (which Appellants do not admit), such a piecemeal rejection of Appellants' claim fails to give credence to the particular combination of elements of Appellants' Claim 1 and to the overall combination of features recited in the claim.

The M.P.E.P. provides that "[a]ll words in a claim must be considered in judging the patentability of that claim against the prior art." M.P.E.P. § 2143.03 (citing *In re Wilson*, 424 F.2d 1382, 165 U.S.P.Q. 494, 496 (C.C.P.A. 1970)). Appellants' Claim 1 recites "receiving, by carrier delivery, packages containing returned items at a selected one of the regional returns centers . . . wherein affixed to each package is a printed label, the label having machine readable data representing at least the identification of a merchant associated with the returned item, the printed label including a destination address associated with the selected one of the regional returns centers, the selected one of the regional returns centers selected for carrier delivery of the package because the selected one of the regional returns centers is geographically closer to a location of a customer from which the package is received than others of the plurality of regional returns centers." Although *Hauser* discloses "a return authorization shipping label," the label results in the delivery of the returned merchandise to a "central returns facility" or "National Return Center." (*Hauser*, Figures 3-5; Abstract; Column 3, lines 59-64). Thus, there is no disclosure in *Hauser* of a "plurality of regional return centers." As a consequence, there is no disclosure in *Hauser* that the printed shipping label includes "a destination address associated with the selected one of the regional return centers, the selected one of the regional returns centers selected . . . because the selected one of the regional returns centers is geographically closer to a location of a customer . . . than others of the plurality of regional returns centers," as recited in Appellants' Claim 1.

Furthermore, the disclosures of *ReturnValet1* and *Junger* do not cure the deficiencies identified above with respect to *Hauser* and Appellants' Claim 1. Although *ReturnValet1* discloses a plurality postal centers to which products can be returned, *ReturnValet1* specifically states that such postal centers are where "[the consumer] can go and return the

product." (Page 1). The returned packages received at the postal centers of *ReturnValet1* are not disclosed to have "a printed label" and certainly are not disclosed as having "a printed label including a destination address associated with the selected one of the regional return centers, the selected one of the regional returns centers selected . . . because the selected one of the regional returns centers is geographically closer to a location of a customer . . . than others of the plurality of regional returns centers," as recited in Appellants' Claim 1.

With respect to *Junger*, the Examiner does not allege that *Junger* discloses either "a printed label" or "a plurality of regional return centers." Rather, *Junger* merely discloses linking to a "shipper, such as UPS, FedEx or U.S. mail, to request a pickup for return or service of the product from the customer." (*Junger*, paragraph 181). *Junger* also does not disclose a printed shipping label or its content. Thus, *Junger* also cannot be said to disclose, teach, or suggest "a printed label including a destination address associated with the selected one of the regional return centers, the selected one of the regional returns centers selected . . . because the selected one of the regional returns centers is geographically closer to a location of a customer . . . than others of the plurality of regional returns centers," as recited in Appellants' Claim 1.

Accordingly, Appellants respectfully submit that the proposed *Hauser-ReturnValet1-Junger* combination does not disclose, teach, or suggest the combination of features recited in Appellants' Claim 1. In fact, the rejection of Claim 1 over the proposed *Hauser-ReturnValet1-Junger* combination, in the manner provided by the Examiner, can only result from the piecing together of disjointed portions of unrelated references to reconstruct Appellants' claims. Stated differently, the proposed *Hauser-ReturnValet1-Junger* combination does not, taken as a whole, suggest the claimed invention, taken as a whole.

For at least these reasons, Appellants respectfully submit that the rejections of independent Claim 1 and its dependent claims (including Claim 3) are improper and should be reversed by the Board.

The Examiner also relies on the proposed *Hauser-ReturnValet1-Junger* combination to reject independent Claim 33. Appellants respectfully submit, however, that the proposed

Hauser-ReturnValet1-Junger combination does not disclose, teach, or suggest the combination of features and operations recited in Appellants' independent Claim 33. Claim 33 recites "receiving a package containing at least one returned item at a selected one of the plurality of regional returns centers, the package comprising . . . a printed carrier label, the carrier label comprising a destination address associated with the selected regional returns center, the selected one of the regional returns centers selected for carrier delivery of the package because the selected one of the regional returns centers is geographically closer to a location of a customer from which the package is received than others of the plurality of regional returns centers." Thus, for reasons analogous to those discussed above with regard to Claim 1, Appellants respectfully submit that the proposed *Hauser-ReturnValet1-Junger* combination does not disclose, teach, or suggest each and every element set forth in Appellants' independent Claim 33.

For at least these reasons, Appellants respectfully submit that the rejections of independent Claim 33 and their respective dependent claims (including Claims 34 and 38-46 that depend on Claim 33) are improper and should be reversed by the Board.

B. The Proposed *Hauser-ReturnValet1-Junger* Combination is Improper

Furthermore, even if the cited references disclose, teach, or suggest Appellants' claim elements (which Appellants dispute above), the proposed *Hauser-ReturnValet1-Junger* combination is improper. Appellants' claims are allowable for at least this additional reason.

Claims 1, 3, 33, 34, and 38-46 have been rejected over the proposed *Hauser-ReturnValet1-Junger* combination. With respect to Claims 1, 3, 33, 34, and 38-46, it appears that the Examiner has merely proposed alleged advantages of combining *Hauser* with *ReturnValet1* and *Junger* (advantages which Appellants do not admit could even be achieved by combining these references in the manner the Examiner proposes). For example, with regard to *Hauser* and *ReturnValet1*, the Examiner states "[i]t would have been obvious to one of ordinary skill in the art at the time of the invention to have modified the method of *Hauser* with the maintaining a plurality of regional return centers and returning to the station closest to the customer of *ReturnValet1*, since such a modification would have provided a decrease in effort and an increase in return efficiency via a means for a customer to receive instant

credit for a returned item (see at least page 1 of ReturnValet1)." (Final Office Action, page 4). With regard to *Hauser* and *Junger*, the Examiner states "[i]t would have been obvious to one of ordinary skill in the art at the time of the invention to have modified the method of *Hauser* with the carrier delivery, as taught by *Junger*, since such a modification would have provided a further simplified return process for a customer (at least paragraph [0181] of *Junger*." (Final Office Action, page 4). While the Examiner has cited portions of *ReturnValet1* and *Junger* that tout advantages of their respective systems, the Examiner has not pointed to any portions of the cited references that would teach, suggest, or motivate one of ordinary skill in the art at the time of invention to incorporate the central return facility disclosed in *Hauser* with the postal centers disclosed in *ReturnValet1* and the carrier delivery disclosed in *Junger*. In other words, the alleged advantage of the systems disclosed in *ReturnValet1* and *Junger* do not provide an explanation as to: (1) why it would have been obvious to one of ordinary skill in the art at the time of Appellants' invention (***without using Appellants' claims as a guide***) to modify the particular techniques disclosed in *Hauser* with the cited disclosures in *ReturnValet1* and *Junger*; (2) how one of ordinary skill in the art at the time of Appellants' invention would have actually done so; and (3) how doing so would purportedly meet the limitations of Appellants' claims. Indeed, if it were sufficient for Examiners to merely point to a purported advantage of one reference and conclude that it would have been obvious to combine of modify that reference with other references simply based on that advantage (which, as should be evident from the case law discussed above, it certainly is not), then virtually any two or more references would be combinable just based on the fact the one reference states an advantage of its system. Of course, as the Federal Circuit has made clear and as discussed above, that is not the law.

Additionally, Appellants respectfully submit that the objectives of the respective systems of *Hauser*, *ReturnValet1*, and *Junger* do not provide a suggestion to combine these references in the manner suggested by the Examiner. It is essential to view the invention as a whole, taking each element into account as well as the advantages, properties, utilities, and results of the invention. *In re Chupp,* 816 F.2d 643, 2 U.S.P.Q.2d 1437 (Fed. Cir. 1987). The very principle and purpose of the system disclosed in *Junger* is the provision of a return system between two intermediary sources of a product. Specifically, *Junger* provides a system and method for obtaining batch reimbursement from a manufacturer for a retailer who has

previously credited customers for the return of like items. With respect to the customer, *Junger* only discloses that a return is accepted "[w]hen a customer returns a product with a receipt," "the serial numbers match," and "all other return conditions are met." (Column 2, lines 14-18). However, *Junger* assumes that this transaction occurs prior to the receipt of the returned items for processing using the return system of *Junger*. In *Junger*, it is the merchant who is being reimbursed by the manufacturer.

Conversely, *Hauser* provides customers of merchants "with a return authorization shipping label" that can then be used to return merchandise to a "central return facility." (Abstract). According to *Hauser*, "a return label is provided to the customer for inclusion with the merchandise being returned." (Column 2, lines 16-19). The customer then "ships the merchandise being returned to the return facility." Thus, while the objective of *Junger* is to provide for the processing of retailer returns on a batch-basis in a retailer-manufacturer context, the objective of *Hauser* is to provide for the processing of customer returns on an item-basis in a retailer-customer context. As a result, the solution proposed in *Junger* is drastically different from the solution proposed in *Hauser*, and one of ordinary skill in the art at the time of invention would not have been motivated to combine the disclosure of *Junger* with the disclosure of *Hauser*.

It is clear based at least on the many distinctions discussed above that the proposed *Hauser-ReturnValet1-Junger* combination does not, taken as a whole, suggest the claimed invention, taken as a whole. It is improper for an Examiner to use hindsight having read the Appellants' disclosure to arrive at an obviousness rejection. *In re* Fine, 837 F.2d 1071, 1075, 5 U.S.P.Q.2d 1596, 1600 (Fed. Cir. 1988). It is improper to use the claimed invention as an instruction manual or template to piece together the teachings of the prior art so that the claimed invention is rendered obvious. *In re* Fritch, 972 F.2d 1260, 23 U.S.P.Q.2d 1780 (Fed. Cir. 1992). The inconsistencies in *Junger* and *Hauser*, as identified by Appellants above, evidences the Examiners reconstruction of Appellants' claims using hindsight to piece together disjointed portions of analogous, but inconsistent references. Accordingly, Appellants respectfully submit that the Examiner's conclusions set forth in the Office Action do not meet the requirements set forth in the M.P.E.P. and the governing Federal Circuit case law for demonstrating a *prima facie* case of obviousness.

For at least these reasons, Appellants respectfully submit that the proposed *Hauser-ReturnValet1-Junger* combination is improper with respect to Appellants' Claims 1, 3, 33, 34, and 38-46. Accordingly, the rejection of Appellants' claims over the proposed *Hauser-ReturnValet1-Junger* combination should be reversed by the Board.

IV. Claims 4 and 35 are Allowable

Claims 4 and 35 are rejected over the proposed *Hauser-ReturnValet1-Junger-ReturnValet2* combination. Appellants contend, however, that Claims 4 and 35 are allowable over the proposed *Hauser-ReturnValet1-Junger-ReturnValet2* combination for at least two reasons. First, the proposed *Hauser-ReturnValet1-Junger-ReturnValet2* combination fails to teach, suggest, or disclose the combination of elements recited in Claims 4 and 35. Second, the proposed *Hauser-ReturnValet1-Junger-ReturnValet2* combination is improper as applied to Appellants' Claims 4 and 35.

A. Claims 4 and 35 are Allowable over the Cited References

Claims 4 and 35 depend upon independent Claims 1 and 33, respectively, which Appellants have shown above to be allowable. Accordingly, Claims 4 and 35 are not obvious over the proposed *Hauser-ReturnValet1-Junger-ReturnValet2* combination at least because of their respective dependencies.

Additionally, dependent Claims 4 and 35 recite elements that further distinguish the art. **For example,** Claim 4 depends from Claim 3, which depends from Claim 1. Claim 1 recites "a printed label . . . having machine readable data representing at least the identification of a merchant." Claim 3 recites that the machine readable data further identifies a purchase transaction." Claim 4 further clarifies that he purchase transaction is represented by an invoice number." Thus, Claim 4 requires that the machine readable data further identifies a purchase transaction "by an invoice number." Claim 35 recites certain analogous features and operations.

Appellants contend that the proposed *Hauser-ReturnValet1-Junger-ReturnValet2* combination does not disclose, teach, or suggest the combination of features recited in Claims

4 and 35. In the Final Office Action, the Examiner acknowledges that *Hauser*, *ReturnValet1*, and *Junger* fail to disclose the features recited in Claims 4 and 35. (Final Office Action, page 8). In maintaining the rejection, the Examiner relies specifically upon *ReturnValet2* and states that "ReturnValet2 teaches that it is known to include the purchase transaction is represented by an invoice number (Page 2)." (Final Office Action, page 8). Even if *ReturnValet2* discloses what the Examiner alleges, Appellants disagree with the Examiner's conclusion that *ReturnValet2* discloses the particular combination of features recited in Claims 4 and 35. In fact, *ReturnValet2* merely discloses that "[c]onsumers should bring their invoice or gift receipt with their merchandise" when bringing in a return. (*ReturnValet2*, page 2, paragraph 2). Their is no disclosure in *ReturnValet2,* however of "a printed label having machine readable data. . . . identifying a purchase transaction . . . by an invoice number," as recited in Claims 1, 3, and 4 when read together. Accordingly, Appellants respectfully submit that the proposed *Hauser-ReturnValet1-Junger-ReturnValet2* combination does not disclose, teach, or suggest the combination of features recited in Appellants' Claims 4 and 35.

For at least these reasons, Appellants respectfully submit that the rejections of dependent Claims 4 and 35 are improper and should be reversed by the Board.

B. The Proposed *Hauser-ReturnValet1-Junger-ReturnValet2* Combination is Improper

Furthermore, even if the cited references disclose, teach, or suggest Appellants' claim elements (which Appellants dispute above), the proposed *Hauser-ReturnValet1-Junger-ReturnValet2* combination is improper. Appellants' claims are allowable for at least this additional reason.

According to the Examiner and with regard to *Hauser* and *ReturnValet1*, "[i]t would have been obvious to one of ordinary skill in the art at the time of the invention to have modified the method of *Hauser* with the maintaining a plurality of regional return centers and returning to the station closest to the customer of *ReturnValet1*, since such a modification would have provided a decrease in effort and an increase in return efficiency via a means for a customer to receive instant credit for a returned item (see at least page 1 of ReturnValet1)."

(Final Office Action, page 4). With regard to *Hauser* and *Junger*, the Examiner states "[i]t would have been obvious to one of ordinary skill in the art at the time of the invention to have modified the method of *Hauser* with the carrier delivery, as taught by *Junger*, since such a modification would have provided a further simplified return process for a customer (at least paragraph [0181] of *Junger*)." (Final Office Action, page 4). With regard to *Hauser* and *ReturnValet2*, the Examiner states "[i]t would have been obvious to one of ordinary skill in the art at the time of the invention to have modified the method of *Hauser* with representing a purchase transaction with an invoice number, as taught by *ReturnValet2*, since such a modification would have expedited the returns process (see at least page 2 of *ReturnValet 2*)." (Final Office Action, page 9).

Again, it appears that the Examiner has merely proposed alleged advantages of combining *Hauser* with *ReturnValet1, Junger*, and *ReturnValet2* (advantages which Appellants do not admit could even be achieved by combining these references in the manner the Examiner proposes). While the Examiner has cited portions of *ReturnValet1*, *Junger*, and *ReturnValet2* that tout advantages of their respective systems, the Examiner has not pointed to any portions of the cited references that would teach, suggest, or motivate one of ordinary skill in the art at the time of invention to incorporate the central return facility disclosed in *Hauser* with the postal centers disclosed in *ReturnValet1*, the carrier delivery disclosed in *Junger*, and the invoice number disclosed in *ReturnValet2*. In other words, the alleged advantage of the systems disclosed in *ReturnValet1*, *Junger*, and *ReturnValet2* do not provide an explanation as to: (1) why it would have been obvious to one of ordinary skill in the art at the time of Appellants' invention (***without using Appellants' claims as a guide***) to modify the particular techniques disclosed in *Hauser* with the cited disclosures in *ReturnValet1*, *Junger*, and *ReturnValet2*; (2) how one of ordinary skill in the art at the time of Appellants' invention would have actually done so; and (3) how doing so would purportedly meet the limitations of Appellants' claims. Indeed, if it were sufficient for Examiners to merely point to a purported advantage of one reference and conclude that it would have been obvious to combine of modify that reference with other references simply based on that advantage (which, as should be evident from the case law discussed above, it certainly is not), then virtually any two or more references would be combinable just based on the fact the one

reference states an advantage of its system. Of course, as the Federal Circuit has made clear and as discussed above, that is not the law.

Additionally, and as discussed above with respect to independent Claims 1 and 33, Appellants respectfully submit that the objectives of the respective systems of *Hauser* and *Junger* do not provide a suggestion to combine these references in the manner suggested by the Examiner. The very principle and purpose of the system disclosed in *Junger* is the provision of a return system between two intermediary sources of a product. Specifically, *Junger* provides a system and method for obtaining batch reimbursement from a manufacturer for a retailer who has previously credited customers for the return of like items. With respect to the customer, *Junger* only discloses that a return is accepted "[w]hen a customer returns a product with a receipt," "the serial numbers match," and "all other return conditions are met." (Column 2, lines 14-18). However, *Junger* assumes that this transaction occurs prior to the receipt of the returned items for processing using the return system of *Junger*. In *Junger*, it is the merchant who is being reimbursed by the manufacturer.

Conversely, *Hauser* provides customers of merchants "with a return authorization shipping label" that can then be used to return merchandise to a "central return facility." (Abstract). According to *Hauser*, "a return label is provided to the customer for inclusion with the merchandise being returned." (Column 2, lines 16-19). The customer then "ships the merchandise being returned to the return facility." Thus, while the objective of *Junger* is to provide for the processing of retailer returns on a batch-basis in a retailer-manufacturer context, the objective of *Hauser* is to provide for the processing of customer returns on an item-basis in a retailer-customer context. As a result, the solution proposed in *Junger* is drastically different from the solution proposed in *Hauser*, and one of ordinary skill in the art at the time of invention would not have been motivated to combine the disclosure of *Junger* with the disclosure of *Hauser*.

It is clear based at least on the many distinctions discussed above that the proposed *Hauser-ReturnValet1-Junger-ReturnValet2* combination does not, taken as a whole, suggest the claimed invention, taken as a whole. It is improper for an Examiner to use hindsight having read the Appellants' disclosure to arrive at an obviousness rejection. *In re* Fine, 837 F.2d 1071,

1075, 5 U.S.P.Q.2d 1596, 1600 (Fed. Cir. 1988). It is improper to use the claimed invention as an instruction manual or template to piece together the teachings of the prior art so that the claimed invention is rendered obvious. *In re* Fritch, 972 F.2d 1260, 23 U.S.P.Q.2d 1780 (Fed. Cir. 1992). The inconsistencies in *Junger* and *Hauser*, as identified by Appellants above, evidences the Examiners reconstruction of Appellants' claims using hindsight to piece together disjointed portions of analogous, but inconsistent references. Accordingly, Appellants respectfully submit that the Examiner's conclusions set forth in the Office Action do not meet the requirements set forth in the M.P.E.P. and the governing Federal Circuit case law for demonstrating a *prima facie* case of obviousness.

For at least these reasons, Appellants respectfully submit that the proposed *Hauser-ReturnValet1-Junger-ReturnValet2* combination is improper with respect to Appellants' Claims 4 and 35. Accordingly, the rejection of Appellants' claims over the proposed *Hauser-ReturnValet1-Junger-ReturnValet2* combination should be reversed by the Board.

V. Claims 5, 6, 36, and 37 are Allowable

Claims 5, 6, 36, and 37 are rejected over the proposed *Hauser-ReturnValet1-Junger-ReturnValet2* combination. Appellants contend, however, that Claims 5, 6, 36, and 37 are allowable over the proposed *Hauser-ReturnValet1-Junger-ReturnValet2* combination for at least two reasons. First, the proposed *Hauser-ReturnValet1-Junger-ReturnValet2* combination fails to teach, suggest, or disclose the combination of elements recited in Claims 5, 6, 36, and 37. Second, the proposed *Hauser-ReturnValet1-Junger-ReturnValet2* combination is improper as applied to Appellants' Claims 5, 6, 36, and 37.

A. Claims 5, 6, 36, and 37 are Allowable over the Cited References

Claims 5 and 6 depend upon independent Claim 1, which Appellants have shown above to be allowable. Claims 36 and 37 depend upon independent Claim 33, which Appellants have shown above to be allowable. Accordingly, Claims 5, 6, 36, and 37 are not obvious over the proposed *Hauser-ReturnValet1-Junger-ReturnValet2* combination at least because of their respective dependencies.

Additionally, dependent Claims 5, 6, 36, and 37 recite elements that further distinguish the art. For example, Claim 5 depends from Claim 3, which depends from Claim 1. Claim 1 recites "a printed label . . . having machine readable data representing at least the identification of a merchant." Claim 3 recites that the machine readable data further identifies a purchase transaction." Claim 5 further clarifies that the purchase transaction is represented by a customer number." Conversely, Claim 6 further clarifies that the purchase transaction is "represented by a product number." Thus, Claim 5 requires that the machine readable data further identifies a purchase transaction "by a customer number," and Claim 6 requires that the machine readable data further identifies a purchase transaction "by a product number." Claims 36 and 37 recite certain features and operations that are analogous to those of Claims 5 and 6, respectively.

Appellants contend that the proposed *Hauser-ReturnValet1-Junger-ReturnValet2* combination does not disclose, teach, or suggest the combination of features recited in Claims 5, 6, 36 and 37. In the Final Office Action, the Examiner acknowledges that *Hauser*, *ReturnValet1*, and *Junger* fail to disclose the features recited in Claims 4 and 35. (Final Office Action, page 8). In maintaining the rejection, the Examiner makes the following statement:

> The recitations that "wherein the purchase transaction is represented by a customer number" and "wherein the purchase transaction is represented by a product number" are given little patentable weight because it imparts no structural or functional specificity which serves to patentably distinguish the instant invention from the other "invoice number" already disclosed by ReturnValet2.

(Final Office Action, page 8). Appellants disagree with the Examiner's contention that patentable weight should not be afforded to Applicants' claim elements. By failing to give patentable weight to Appellants' recitations, the Examiner is not giving credence to each element of Appellant's Claims 5, 6, 36, and 37.

The M.P.E.P. provides that "[a]ll words in a claim must be considered in judging the patentability of that claim against the prior art." M.P.E.P. § 2143.03 (citing *In re Wilson*, 424 F.2d 1382, 165 U.S.P.Q. 494, 496 (C.C.P.A. 1970)). Claims 5 and 36 recite that the machine

readable data further identifies a purchase transaction "by a customer number," and Claims 6 and 37 requires that the machine readable data further identifies a purchase transaction "by a product number." Claims 1 and 33 further recite that the machine readable data is included on a printed label. Additional steps recited in Claims 1 and 33 include "scanning the machine readable data on each package" and "correlating at least a portion of the machine readable data with a set of returns rules." Scanning the machine readable data on each package would result in the identification of a customer number and the identification of a purchase transaction based on the customer number where the machine readable data includes "a customer number," as recited in Claims 5 and 36. Conversely, scanning the machine readable data on each package would result in the identification of a product number and the identification of a purchase transaction based on the product number where the machine readable data includes "a product number," as recited in Claims 6 and 37. Accordingly, the recitations of Claims 5, 6, 36, and 37 are patentably distinguishable from the "invoice number" recited in Appellants' claims 4 and 35. As such, patentable weight should be afforded to the recitations of Appellants' Claims 5, 6, 36, and 37.

For at least these reasons, Appellants respectfully submit that the rejections of dependent Claims 5, 6, 36, and 37 are improper and should be reversed by the Board.

B. The Proposed *Hauser-ReturnValet1-Junger-ReturnValet2* Combination is Improper

Furthermore, even if the cited references disclose, teach, or suggest Appellants' claim elements (which Appellants dispute above), the proposed *Hauser-ReturnValet1-Junger-ReturnValet2* combination is improper. Appellants have provided a detailed discussion above with respect to Claims 4 and 35 as to why the proposed *Hauser-ReturnValet1-Junger-ReturnValet2* combination is improper. The reasons discussed above are equally applicable to Claims 5, 6, 36, and 37. Accordingly, for reasons analogous to those discussed above with respect to Claims 4 and 35, Appellants' contend that the proposed *Hauser-ReturnValet1-Junger-ReturnValet2* combination is improper as applied to Appellants' Claims 5, 6, 36, and 37. Accordingly, the rejection of Appellants' claims over the proposed *Hauser-ReturnValet1-Junger-ReturnValet2* combination should be reversed by the Board.

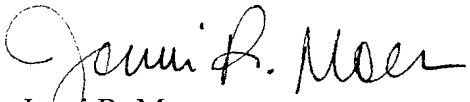
CONCLUSION

Appellants have demonstrated that the present invention, as claimed, is clearly distinguishable over the prior art cited by the Examiner. Therefore, Appellants respectfully request the Board to reverse the final rejections and instruct the Examiner to issue a Notice of Allowance with respect to all pending claims.

The Commissioner is hereby authorized to charge $250.00 for filing this Appeal Brief to Deposit Account No. 02-0384 of Baker Botts, L.L.P. Appellants believe that no other fees are due; however, the Commissioner is hereby authorized to charge any fees or credit any overpayment to Deposit Account No. 02-0384 of Baker Botts, L.L.P.

Respectfully submitted,

BAKER BOTTS L.L.P.
Attorneys for Appellants



Jenni R. Moen
Reg. No. 52,038
(214) 953-6809

Date May 4, 2007

Correspondence Address:

at Customer No. **05073**

APPENDIX A

Pending Claims

1. **(Previously Presented)** A method, performed by a returns provider, of handling customer returns of items on behalf of multiple merchants, comprising the steps of:

storing a set of merchant returns rules in a processing system, such that a set of returns rules is associated with each merchant,

maintaining a plurality of regional return centers;

receiving, by carrier delivery, packages containing returned items at a selected one of the regional returns centers;

wherein affixed to each package is a printed label, the label having machine readable data representing at least the identification of a merchant associated with the returned item, the printed label including a destination address associated with the selected one of the regional returns centers, the selected one of the regional returns centers selected for carrier delivery of the package because the selected one of the regional returns centers is geographically closer to a location of a customer from which the package is received than others of the plurality of regional returns centers;

scanning the machine readable data on each package;

correlating at least a portion of the machine readable data with a set of returns rules; and

notifying the merchant of a returned package, based on the results of the correlating step.

2. **(Canceled)**

3. **(Original)** The method of Claim 1, wherein the machine readable data further identifies a purchase transaction.

4. **(Original)** The method of Claim 3, wherein the purchase transaction is represented by an invoice number.

5. **(Original)** The method of Claim 3, wherein the purchase transaction is represented by a customer number.

6. **(Original)** The method of Claim 3, wherein the purchase transaction is represented by a product number.

7. **(Withdrawn)** The method of Claim 1, wherein the machine readable label further has data representing the package origin and package delivery location, and further comprising the steps of weighing the package and using the processing system to assess shipping charges.

8. **(Withdrawn)** The method of Claim 1, further comprising the step of notifying the customer of receipt of the return.

9. **(Withdrawn)** The method of Claim 8, wherein the notifying is performed by postcard.

10. **(Withdrawn)** The method of Claim 8, wherein the notifying is performed by email.

11. **(Withdrawn)** The method of Claim 1, further comprising the step of using the machine readable data to generate a credit advice of credit for the return.

12. **(Withdrawn)** The method of Claim 11, further comprising the step of notifying the customer of the credit.

13. **(Withdrawn)** The method of Claim 11, further comprising the step of notifying the merchant of the credit.

14. **(Withdrawn)** The method of Claim 1, further comprising the step of using the processing system to display order data associated with the package during the correlating step.

15. **(Withdrawn)** The method of Claim 1, further comprising the step of opening the package, and wherein the notifying step is performed after the opening step.

16. **(Withdrawn)** The method of Claim 1, further comprising the step of transmitting data from the scanning step to a return tracking system.

17. **(Withdrawn)** The method of Claim 1, further comprising the step of transmitting data about the return to the merchant.

18. **(Withdrawn)** The method of Claim 17, wherein the transmitting is to a customer service system of the merchant.

19. **(Withdrawn)** The method of Claim 18, wherein the customer service system is a website.

20. **(Withdrawn)** The method of Claim 18, wherein the customer service system is a call center.

21. **(Withdrawn)** A method, performed by a returns provider, of handling customer returns of items on behalf of multiple merchants, comprising the steps of:

storing a set of merchant returns rules in a processing system, such that a set of returns rules is associated with each merchant,

receiving packages containing returned items at a returns center;

wherein affixed to each package is a printed label, the label having machine readable

22. **(Withdrawn)** A system for handling customer returns of items on behalf of multiple merchants, the returns being made by customers in packages having machine readable labels, comprising:

a number of return centers, having at least a scanning station for scanning the machine readable label; a sorting station for sorting the packages; and an examination station for determining the final disposition of the item; and

a processing system for storing return rules from each merchant, for receiving the machine readable data from the scanning station, for linking the package identification with the rules of a particular merchant, and for transmitting return rules for display at one or more of the return center stations;

wherein the return rules specify at least a procedure for return notifications.

23. **(Withdrawn)** The system of Claim 22, wherein the processing system is further operable to communicate return information to the merchant.

24. **(Withdrawn)** The system of Claim 22, wherein the processing system is further operable to communicate return information to the customer that returned the package.

25. **(Withdrawn)** The system of Claim 22, wherein the scanning station is further operable to weigh the packages, and wherein the processing system is further operable to assess shipping charges for the packages.

26. **(Withdrawn)** The system of Claim 22, further comprising an opening station for opening packages and examining the contents.

27. **(Withdrawn)** A method, performed by a returns provider, of handling customer returns of items on behalf of multiple merchants, comprising the steps of:

storing a set of item merchant returns rules in a processing system, such that a set of returns rules is associated with each merchant,

receiving packages containing returned items at a returns center;

wherein affixed to each package is a printed label, the label having machine readable data representing at least the identification of a merchant associated with the returned item;

scanning the machine readable data on each package;

correlating at least a portion of the machine readable data with a set of returns rules; and

handling the package return in response to the correlating step.

28. **(Withdrawn)** The method of Claim 27, wherein the handling step is performed by notifying the merchant in accordance with one or more returns rules.

29. **(Withdrawn)** The method of Claim 27, wherein the handling step is performed by notifying a customer in accordance with one or more returns rules.

30. **(Withdrawn)** The method of Claim 27, wherein the handling step is performed by disposing of the package in accordance with one or more returns rules.

31. **(Withdrawn)** The method of Claim 27, further comprising the step of opening the package to extract the returned item, and wherein the handling step is performed by disposing of the item in accordance with one or more returns rules.

32. **(Withdrawn)** The method of Claim 27, wherein the machine readable data identifies a purchase transaction.

33. **(Previously Presented)** A method, performed by a returns provider, of handling customer returns of items on behalf of at least one merchant, comprising the steps of:

maintaining a plurality of regional return centers for the processing of the return of items on behalf of at least one merchant;

receiving a package containing at least one returned item at a selected one of the plurality of regional returns centers, the package comprising:

a printed carrier label, the carrier label comprising a destination address associated with the selected regional returns center, the selected one of the regional returns centers selected for carrier delivery of the package because the selected one of the regional returns centers is geographically closer to a location of a customer from which the package is received than others of the plurality of regional returns centers; and

transaction specific machine readable data;

scanning the machine readable data on each package; and

correlating at least a portion of the machine readable data with a set of returns rules to be used in the processing of the at least one returned item.

34. **(Previously Presented)** The method of Claim 33, wherein the machine readable data further identifies a purchase transaction.

35. **(Previously Presented)** The method of Claim 34, wherein the purchase transaction is represented by an invoice number.

36. **(Previously Presented)** The method of Claim 34, wherein the purchase transaction is represented by a customer number.

37. **(Previously Presented)** The method of Claim 34, wherein the purchase transaction is represented by a product number.

38. **(Previously Presented)** The method of Claim 33, further comprising notifying the customer of the receipt of the package at the selected regional returns center.

39. **(Previously Presented)** The method of Claim 33, further comprising notifying a merchant associated with the at least one returned item of the receipt of the package at the selected regional returns center.

40. **(Previously Presented)** The method of Claim 33, further comprising providing tracking information to the customer.

41. **(Previously Presented)** The method of Claim 33, wherein the printed carrier label includes a visual flag that is human readable, the visual flag indicative of a final package destination other than the selected regional returns center.

42. **(Previously Presented)** The method of Claim 33, further comprising:

determining the location of the customer associated with the package;

determining that the selected one of the regional returns centers is geographically closer to the location of the customer than locations of others of the plurality of regional returns centers

providing the printed carrier label to the customer.

43. **(Previously Presented)** The method of Claim 42, wherein determining the location of the customer comprises determining a postal code of the customer.

44. **(Previously Presented)** The method of Claim 33, wherein the selected regional returns center comprises a carrier station nearest the customer.

45. **(Previously Presented)** The method of Claim 33, wherein the selected regional returns center is associated with the returns provider.

46. **(Previously Presented)** The method of Claim 33, wherein the machine readable data identifies a merchant associated with the at least one returned item, and wherein the set of returns rules to be used in the processing of the at least one returned item is associated with the merchant.

APPENDIX B

U.S. Patent No. 6,536,659 issued to Hauser et al. ("*Hauser*")

US006536659B1

(12) **United States Patent**
Hauser et al.

(10) **Patent No.: US 6,536,659 B1**
(45) **Date of Patent: Mar. 25, 2003**

(54) **FACILITATING RETURNS OF MERCHANDISE PURCHASED FROM OTHER SOURCES**

(75) Inventors: **O. Shannon Hauser**, Bellevue, WA (US); **Billy H. Snipes**, Social Circle, GA (US); **Stephen S. Sugiyama**, Seattle, WA (US); **Christine O. Adkinson**, Woodinville, WA (US)

(73) Assignee: **Returns Online, Inc.**, Mercer Island, WA (US)

(*) Notice: Subject to any disclaimer, the term of this patent is extended or adjusted under 35 U.S.C. 154(b) by 261 days.

(21) Appl. No.: **09/713,421**

(22) Filed: **Nov. 15, 2000**

(51) **Int. Cl.**[7] **G06F 17/00**; G06F 17/60; G06K 15/00

(52) **U.S. Cl.** **235/375**; 235/383; 235/385

(58) **Field of Search** 235/375, 383, 235/385; 705/21, 24, 26, 28, 74, 76, 408

(56) **References Cited**

U.S. PATENT DOCUMENTS

4,967,906	A *	11/1990	Morello et al.	206/387.1
5,042,686	A *	8/1991	Stucki	194/217
5,257,741	A *	11/1993	Rode et al.	241/100
6,018,719	A *	1/2000	Rogers et al.	705/21
2002/0010689	A1 *	1/2002	Tibbs et al.	705/408
2002/0019785	A1 *	2/2002	Whitman	705/28
2002/0138356	A1 *	9/2002	Dutta et al.	705/26

FOREIGN PATENT DOCUMENTS

JP	59049659 A	*	3/1984	G06F/15/21

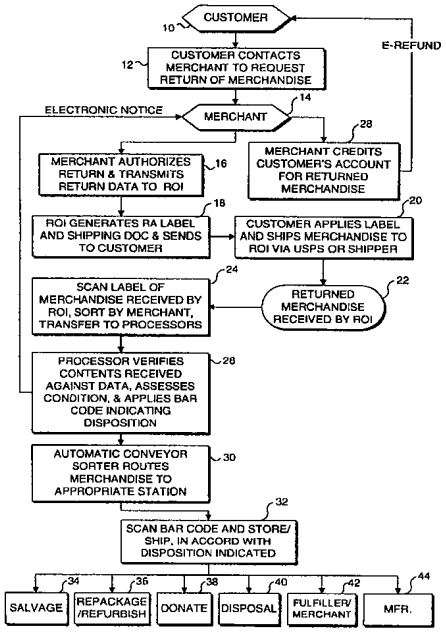
* cited by examiner

Primary Examiner—Thien M. Le
Assistant Examiner—April Nowlin
(74) *Attorney, Agent, or Firm*—Ronald M. Anderson

(57) **ABSTRACT**

A method for handling goods returned by customers of a plurality of different merchants. Merchants who have authorized return of merchandise transmit data identifying the customer and the merchandise to be returned to a central return facility for inclusion in a database. Customers of these merchants package the merchandise to be returned and are provided with a return authorization shipping label by the central return facility. This label includes a scannable bar code identifying the merchant and the customer. After the merchandise is received at the central returns facility, the scannable bar code is scanned so that the merchandise can be sorted by merchant, and the merchandise is then inspected to determine if the merchandise authorized for return has been received. If so, the appropriate merchant is advised, and the customer is electronically credited for the return of the merchandise. A bar code tag is attached to the returned merchandise that has been received to facilitate automated sorting on a conveyer system. The merchandise is thus directed to a storage bin for temporary storage along with other merchandise designated for the same disposition. When a bin is full, the merchandise contained therein is disposed of as designated.

32 Claims, 5 Drawing Sheets



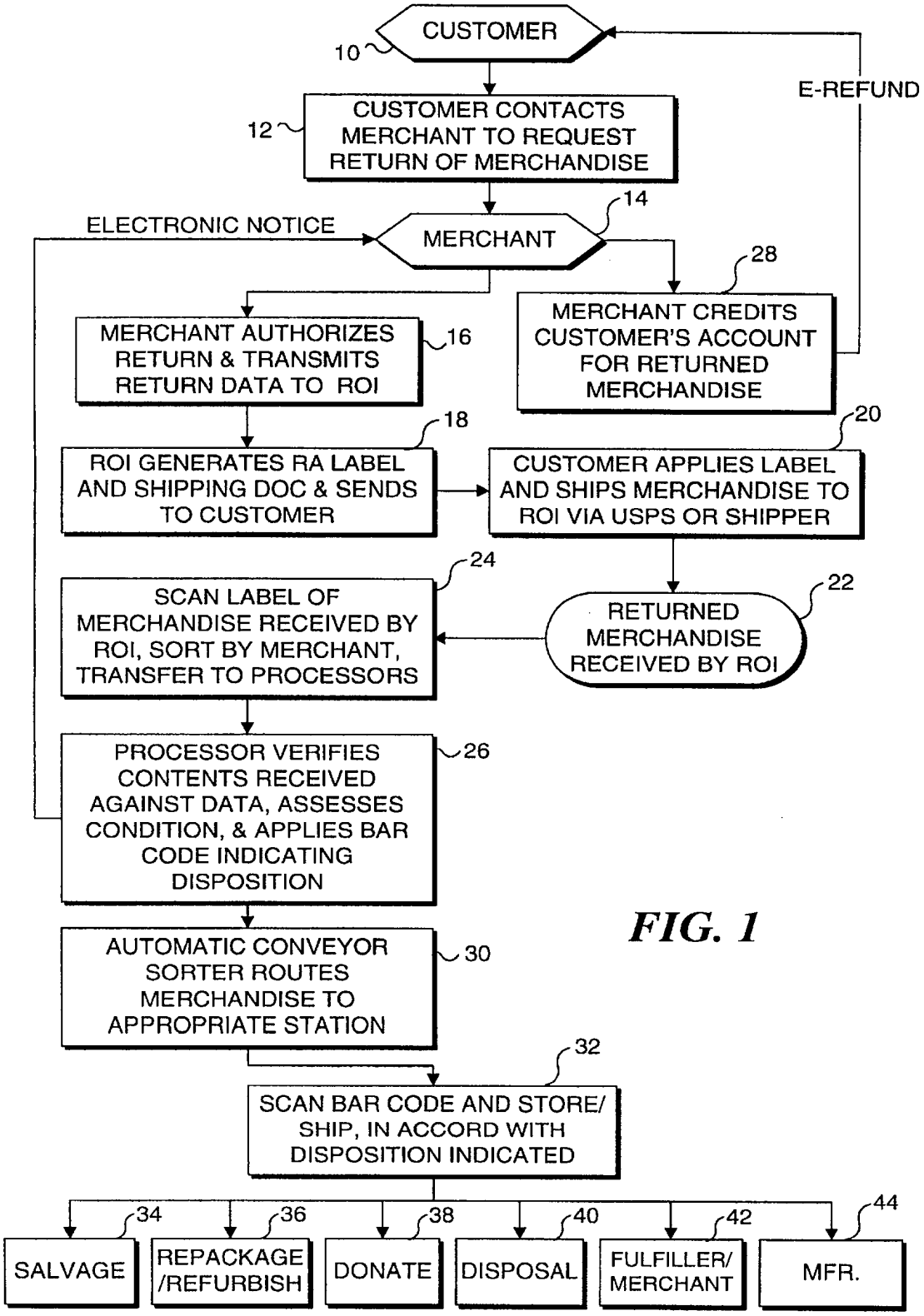

CUSTOMER
10
E-REFUND
CUSTOMER CONTACTS MERCHANT TO REQUEST RETURN OF MERCHANDISE
12
ELECTRONIC NOTICE
MERCHANT
14
28
MERCHANT AUTHORIZES RETURN & TRANSMITS RETURN DATA TO ROI
16
MERCHANT CREDITS CUSTOMER'S ACCOUNT FOR RETURNED MERCHANDISE
18
20
ROI GENERATES RA LABEL AND SHIPPING DOC & SENDS TO CUSTOMER
CUSTOMER APPLIES LABEL AND SHIPS MERCHANDISE TO ROI VIA USPS OR SHIPPER
24
22
SCAN LABEL OF MERCHANDISE RECEIVED BY ROI, SORT BY MERCHANT, TRANSFER TO PROCESSORS
RETURNED MERCHANDISE RECEIVED BY ROI
PROCESSOR VERIFIES CONTENTS RECEIVED AGAINST DATA, ASSESSES CONDITION, & APPLIES BAR CODE INDICATING DISPOSITION
26
AUTOMATIC CONVEYOR SORTER ROUTES MERCHANDISE TO APPROPRIATE STATION
30
32
SCAN BAR CODE AND STORE/ SHIP, IN ACCORD WITH DISPOSITION INDICATED
34
36
38
40
42
44
SALVAGE
REPACKAGE /REFURBISH
DONATE
DISPOSAL
FULFILLER/ MERCHANT
MFR.

FIG. 1

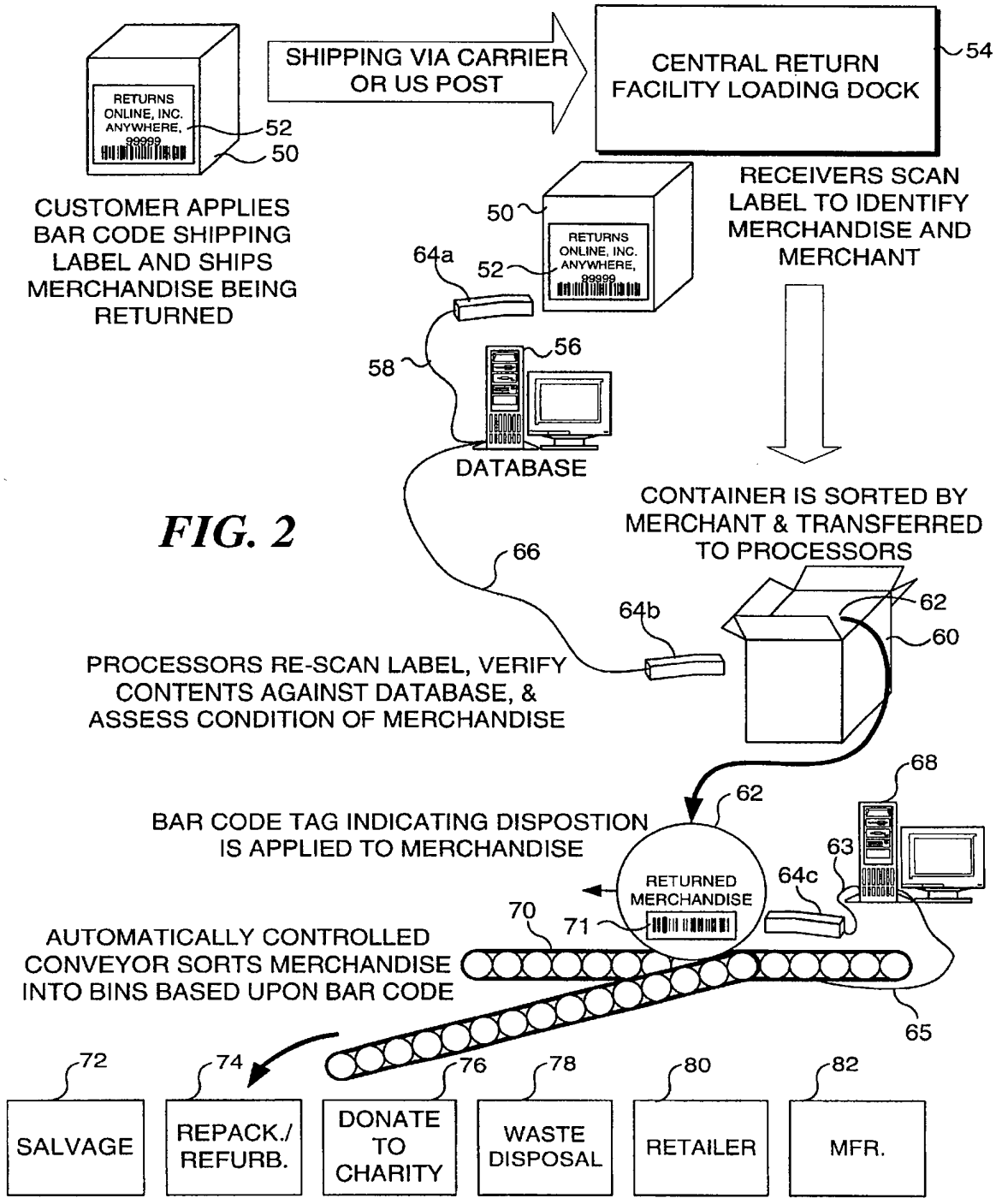

SHIPPING VIA CARRIER OR US POST
CENTRAL RETURN FACILITY LOADING DOCK
54
RETURNS ONLINE, INC. ANYWHERE, 99999
52
50
CUSTOMER APPLIES BAR CODE SHIPPING LABEL AND SHIPS MERCHANDISE BEING RETURNED
RECEIVERS SCAN LABEL TO IDENTIFY MERCHANDISE AND MERCHANT
64a
58
56
DATABASE
CONTAINER IS SORTED BY MERCHANT & TRANSFERRED TO PROCESSORS
66
64b
62
60
PROCESSORS RE-SCAN LABEL, VERIFY CONTENTS AGAINST DATABASE, & ASSESS CONDITION OF MERCHANDISE
68
BAR CODE TAG INDICATING DISPOSTION IS APPLIED TO MERCHANDISE
RETURNED MERCHANDISE
63
64c
70
71
AUTOMATICALLY CONTROLLED CONVEYOR SORTS MERCHANDISE INTO BINS BASED UPON BAR CODE
65
72
74
76
78
80
82
SALVAGE
REPACK./ REFURB.
DONATE TO CHARITY
WASTE DISPOSAL
RETAILER
MFR.

FIG. 2

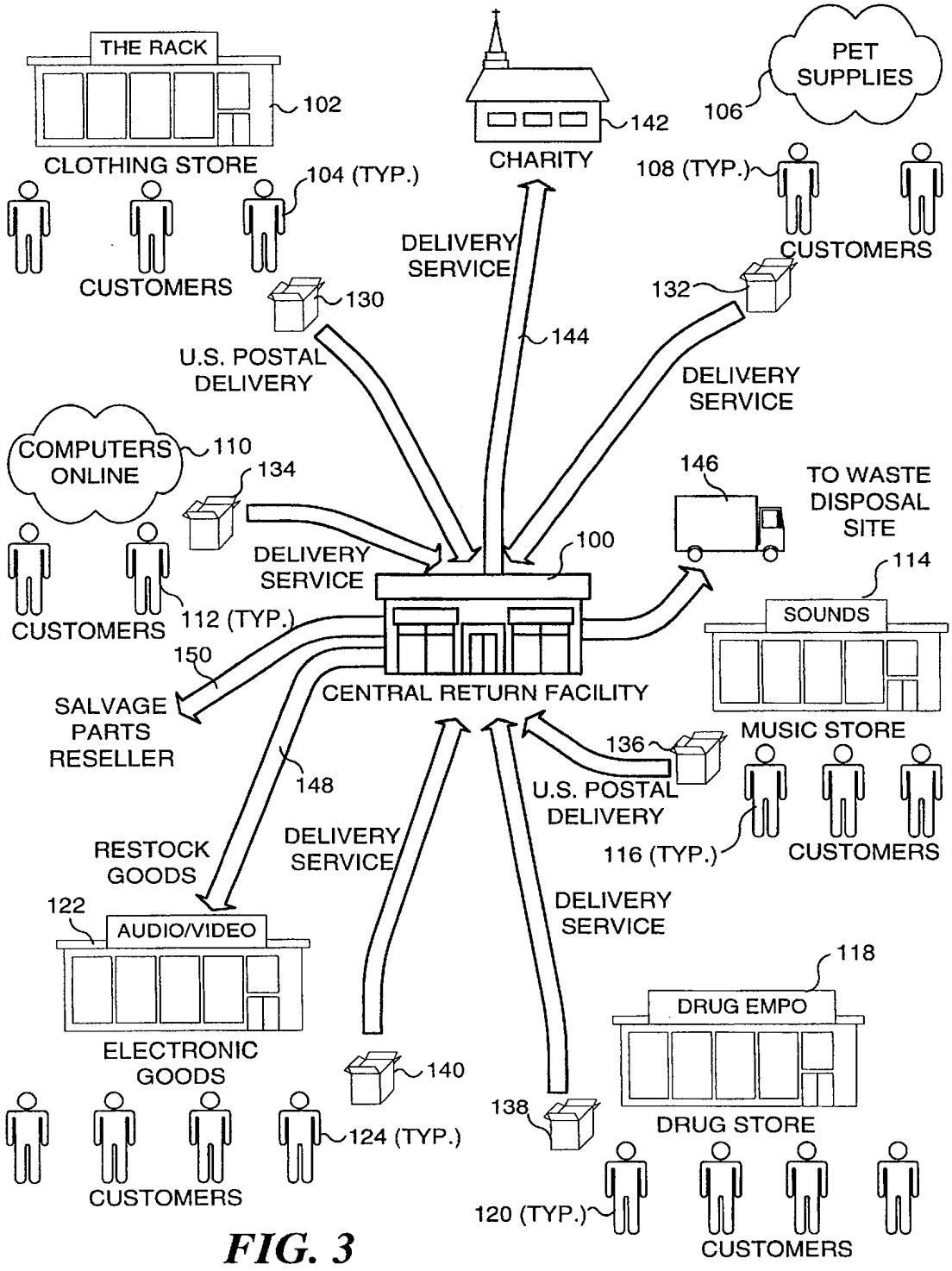

THE RACK
102
CLOTHING STORE
104 (TYP.)
CUSTOMERS
CHARITY
142
PET SUPPLIES
106
108 (TYP.)
CUSTOMERS
DELIVERY SERVICE
144
130
U.S. POSTAL DELIVERY
132
DELIVERY SERVICE
COMPUTERS ONLINE
110
134
CUSTOMERS
112 (TYP.)
DELIVERY SERVICE
100
146
TO WASTE DISPOSAL SITE
114
SOUNDS
MUSIC STORE
150
SALVAGE PARTS RESELLER
CENTRAL RETURN FACILITY
136
U.S. POSTAL DELIVERY
116 (TYP.)
CUSTOMERS
148
RESTOCK GOODS
DELIVERY SERVICE
DELIVERY SERVICE
122
AUDIO/VIDEO
ELECTRONIC GOODS
118
DRUG EMPO
DRUG STORE
140
138
124 (TYP.)
CUSTOMERS
120 (TYP.)
CUSTOMERS

FIG. 3

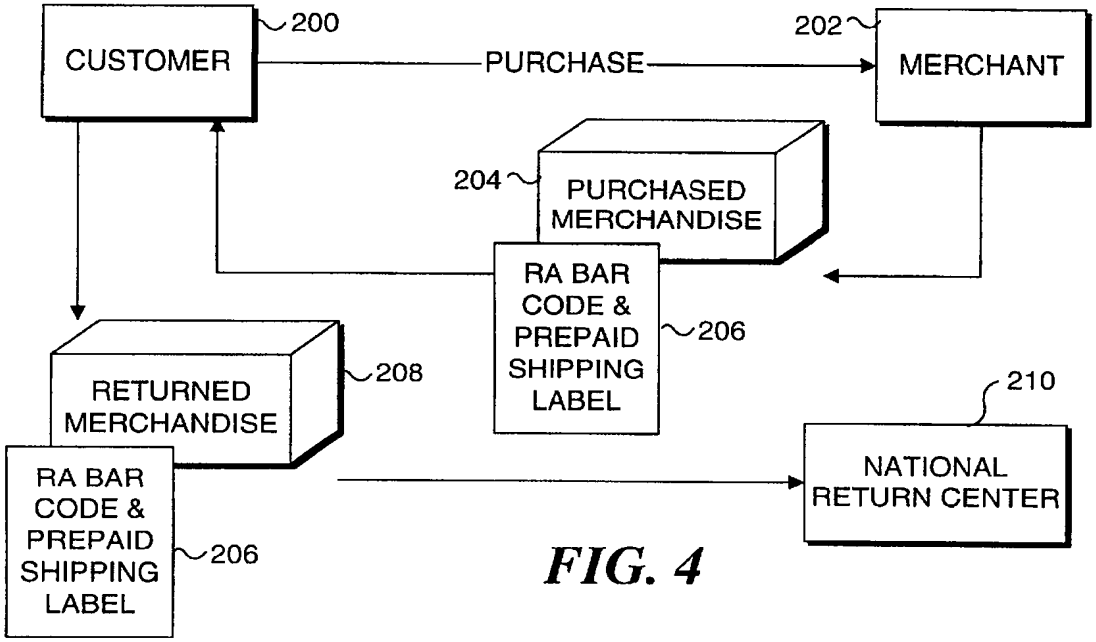

CUSTOMER
200
PURCHASE
202
MERCHANT
204
PURCHASED MERCHANDISE
RA BAR CODE & PREPAID SHIPPING LABEL
206
RETURNED MERCHANDISE
208
210
NATIONAL RETURN CENTER
RA BAR CODE & PREPAID SHIPPING LABEL
206

FIG. 4

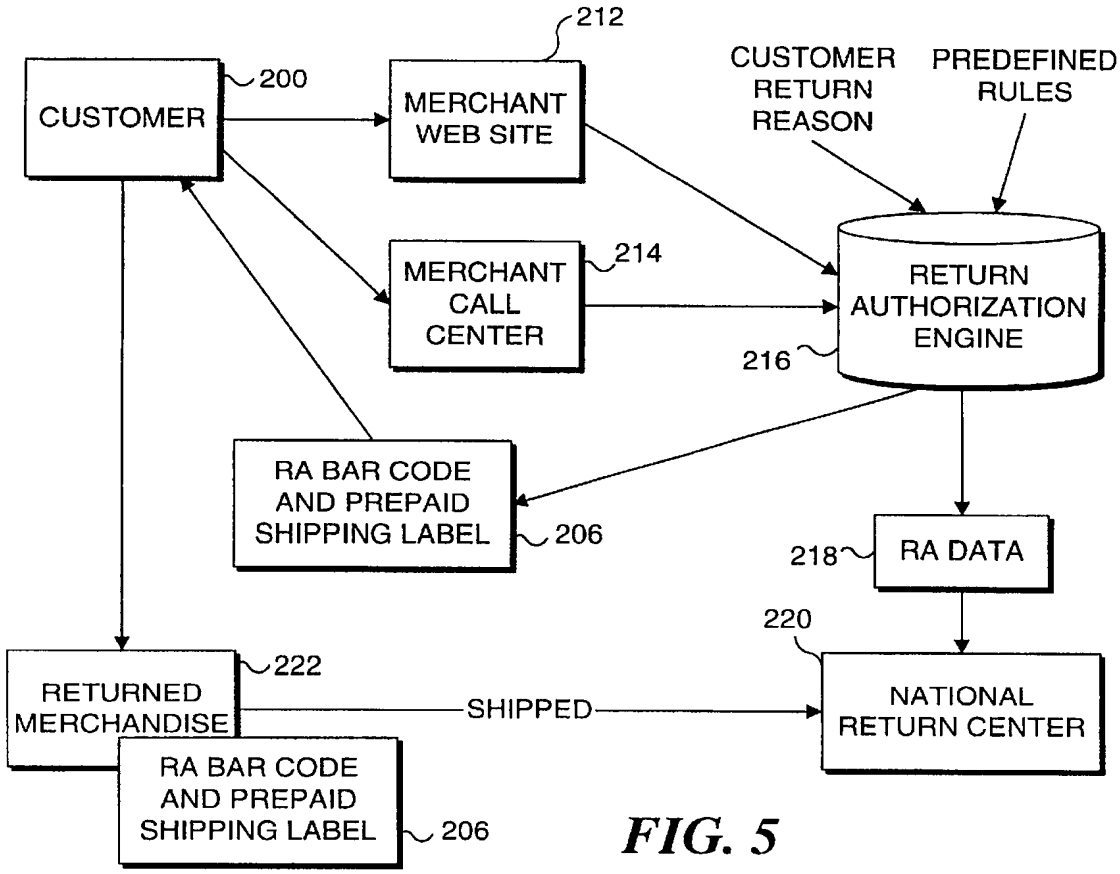

212
CUSTOMER
200
MERCHANT WEB SITE
CUSTOMER RETURN REASON
PREDEFINED RULES
MERCHANT CALL CENTER
214
RETURN AUTHORIZATION ENGINE
216
RA BAR CODE AND PREPAID SHIPPING LABEL
206
218
RA DATA
220
RETURNED MERCHANDISE
222
SHIPPED
NATIONAL RETURN CENTER
RA BAR CODE AND PREPAID SHIPPING LABEL
206

FIG. 5

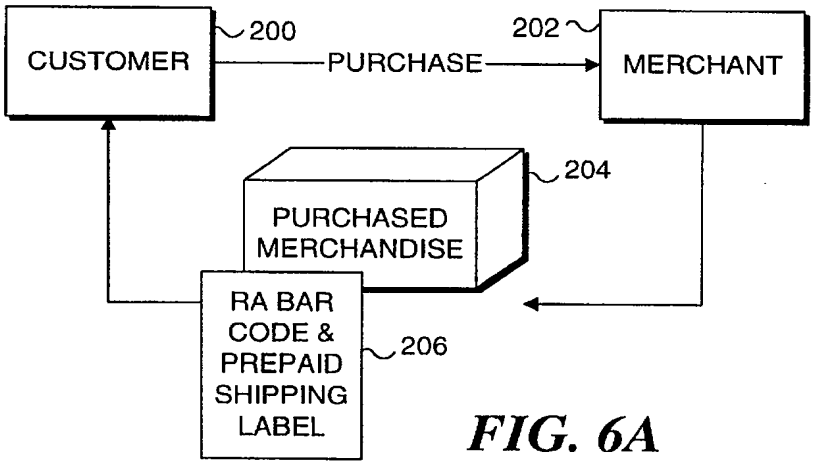

CUSTOMER
200
PURCHASE
202
MERCHANT
PURCHASED MERCHANDISE
204
RA BAR CODE & PREPAID SHIPPING LABEL
206

FIG. 6A

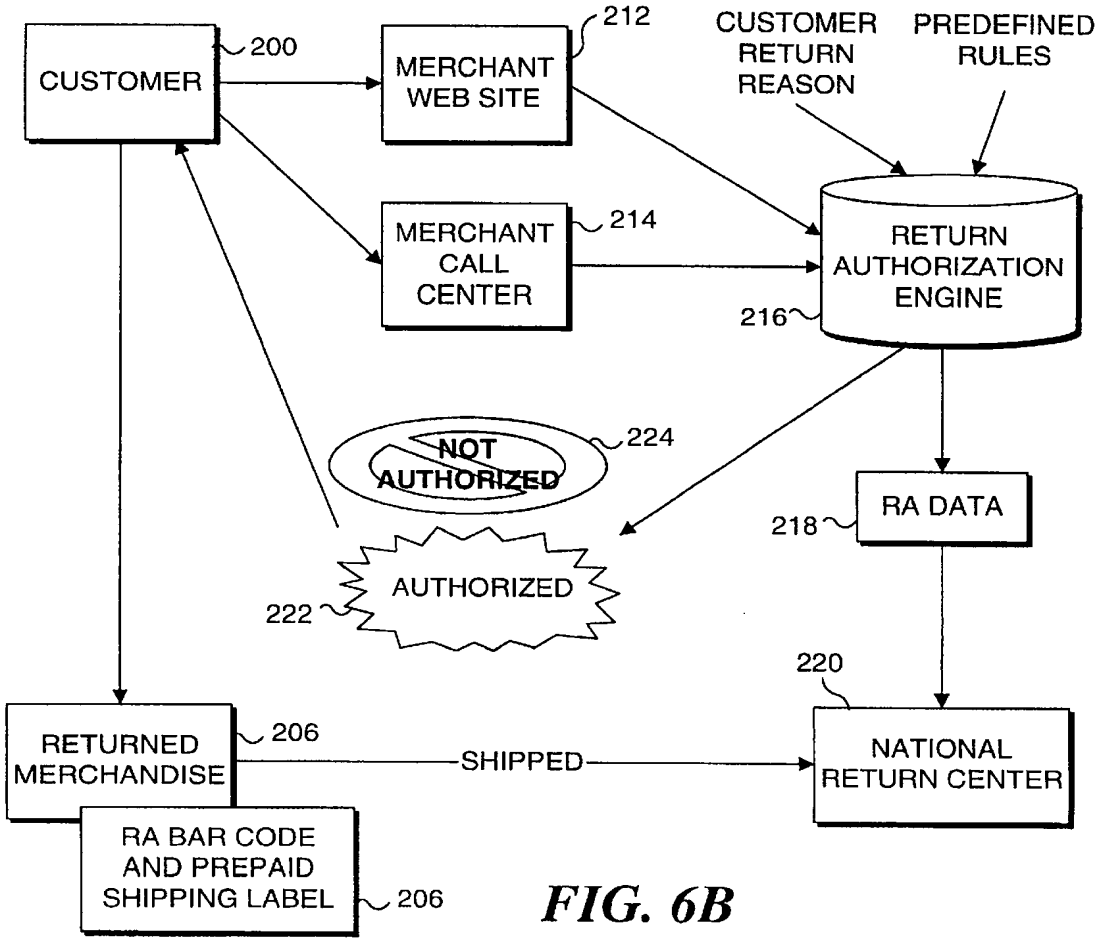

CUSTOMER
200
MERCHANT WEB SITE
212
CUSTOMER RETURN REASON
PREDEFINED RULES
MERCHANT CALL CENTER
214
RETURN AUTHORIZATION ENGINE
216
NOT AUTHORIZED
224
RA DATA
218
AUTHORIZED
222
220
RETURNED MERCHANDISE
206
SHIPPED
NATIONAL RETURN CENTER
RA BAR CODE AND PREPAID SHIPPING LABEL
206

FIG. 6B

FACILITATING RETURNS OF MERCHANDISE PURCHASED FROM OTHER SOURCES

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

This invention generally refers to a method and system for handling returned merchandise, and more specifically, to a method and system for receiving returned merchandise and efficiently processing it for appropriate disposition.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

One of the more troublesome problems that a merchant who sells merchandise to a customer must address is handling returns of merchandise sold to a customer. This problem is particularly significant for merchants who sell online to Internet customers, or through catalog orders, since such merchants typically do not have a local facility at which the merchandise can be physically returned by a customer. Yet, even for conventional "brick and mortar" businesses, the problems associated with handling returned merchandise can be a tremendous burden. An independent survey has determined that 30% of online retailers believe their biggest fulfillment challenge in the year 2001 will be accepting online returns. The importance of this issue should be fully appreciated, since 47% of those surveyed have indicated that they choose not to shop online because they can't return items easily. Whether a shopper is returning merchandise purchased online, or through a catalog transaction, or from a conventional store, the inconvenience of the process can have a significant adverse effect on customer loyalty. Providing prompt and efficient handling of returned merchandise helps to ensure the continued patronage of customers.

Several aspects of handling returned goods cause most of the problems for merchants. A merchant must provide personnel and facilities for processing and handling returned merchandise, which can add substantial overhead to the operation of a business. When goods are returned, they must be checked to determine their condition and to determine if the customer has actually returned the goods purchased from the merchant, or has omitted any portion of the goods that were to have been returned. These steps are essential to ensure that the customer is promptly credited for the cost of the returned goods, but is not credited if the condition and/or contents of the merchandise received are not in accord with the merchant's returned goods policies.

Assuming that a customer returns the goods that were originally purchased by the customer in an acceptable condition, the merchant must determine how to dispose of the goods. This aspect of handling returned goods can be particularly troublesome, because most merchants are not properly equipped to deal with returned goods that cannot be simply reshelved for resale. In some cases, the condition or nature of the goods will preclude them from being repackaged for resale. In other cases, a portion of the returned goods may be salvaged, but the remainder will need to be discarded in an acceptable manner. For other situations, a merchant will prefer to donate the returned goods to an acceptable charitable cause, thereby enjoying the benefit of a tax write-off for the value of the donation. Certain types of goods may represent an environmental hazard if improperly disposed of and will require special handling, in accord with criteria set forth for toxic or hazardous waste. Most merchants do not have the facilities or staff to assess the condition of returned merchandise and to carry out the steps that need to be taken for appropriate handling of the returned goods. Accordingly, it will be evident that it would be preferable to provide a centralized returned merchandise handling agency to process returned merchandise for a plurality of different merchants. Such a centralized agency will be able to more efficiently process returned merchandise than could any individual merchant.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

In accord with the present invention, a method is defined for handling returned merchandise on behalf of a plurality of different merchants. The method provides that merchants transmit data relating to merchandise that might be returned by customers of the merchants to a central database. The data identify the merchant and the merchandise purchased by a customer, and include contact information for the customer. A return label is provided to the customer for inclusion with the merchandise being returned and includes information referencing at least a portion of the data stored in the central database. The return label can be provided with the merchandise when purchased by the customer, and if so, can be usable without obtaining further permission to return the merchandise, or alternatively, is usable only after permission to return the merchandise has been requested and granted. As a further alternative, the return label can be sent to the customer for use after permission to return merchandise has been requested by the customer and granted.

Upon receipt of merchandise that has been returned by the customer, at least part of the information included on the return label is entered into the central database to indicate that the merchandise has been received. The condition of the merchandise is then assessed. A tag is associated with the merchandise to indicate how the merchandise should be disposed, based upon the condition of the merchandise as received. The merchandise is thereafter automatically routed to a station designated for the temporary storage and subsequent disposition of the merchandise as indicated on the tag.

Preferably, the return label comprises a scannable code. To enter at least part of the information, the return label is scanned. Similarly, the tag associated with the merchandise also preferably comprises a scannable code. The tag is thus readily scanned to determine the disposition of the merchandise and to facilitate automatically routing the merchandise to the appropriate station for its disposition. The station designated for the disposition comprises a storage repository designated to hold returned merchandise that have been allocated for a common disposition.

The method also includes the step of electronically reporting receipt of the merchandise that was returned to the merchant who transmitted the data identifying the merchandise. The report indicates the condition and the disposition of the merchandise to the merchant. The account of the customer returning merchandise is credited for the value of the merchandise being returned at any time specified by the merchant from whom the customer purchased the merchandise, but the customer's account is subsequently debited for this value if the merchandised that has been returned fails to meet a condition specified by the merchant. A report regarding the status and/or condition of the merchandise is optionally provided to the merchant at any desired point in the processing of the returned merchandise. The report is preferably electronically posted on a network accessible by the merchant (such as the Internet), showing the status and/or condition of the merchandise that has been returned. In this way, the merchant can track the handling of the returned merchandise through its final disposition.

The options for disposition of the merchandise include salvaging at least one useful component from the merchandise and discarding the remainder of the merchandise, refurbishing and repackaging the merchandise for resale, donating the merchandise to benefit a selected charity, discarding the merchandise in an appropriate waste disposal facility, and returning the merchandise to the inventory of the merchant.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWING FIGURES

The foregoing aspects and many of the attendant advantages of this invention will become more readily appreciated as the same becomes better understood by reference to the following detailed description, when taken in conjunction with the accompanying drawings, wherein:

FIG. **1** is a flow chart illustrating the steps implemented in the present invention;

FIG. **2** is a block diagram illustrating the processing of returned merchandise that has been received at a central processing facility;

FIG. **3** is a schematic diagram illustrating the interaction between the merchants that subscribe to the central return merchandise processing service, their customers who are returning merchandise, the facilities, and several of the options for disposition of the merchandise;

FIG. **4** is a block diagram illustrating a first option for providing a return authorization bar code and prepaid shipping label to a customer for use in returning merchandise;

FIG. **5** is a block diagram illustrating a second option for providing a return authorization bar code and prepaid shipping label to a customer for use in returning merchandise; and

FIG. **6A** and **6B** are block diagrams respectively illustrating the purchase of merchandise that includes a return bar code and prepaid shipping label and the control exercised in authorizing the return of merchandise.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

The logical steps implemented in carrying out the present invention are shown generally in FIG. **1**. The process is typically initiated when, as indicated in a block **12**, a customer **10** contacts a merchant **14** to request authorization to return merchandise to the merchant from whom the merchandise was originally purchased. There are many reasons why a customer will want to return merchandise. For example, merchandise may be of an improper size or color, or otherwise fail to meet the requirements of the customer, or the merchandise may be defective, or may have been supplied to the customer in an incomplete form. The requirements set forth by different merchants to justify granting of an authorization to return merchandise vary from industry to industry, and will often depend upon the nature of the merchandise. Assuming that all of the conditions for return of the merchandise are met, merchant **14** will authorize the customer to return the merchandise to the central return facility, in accord with the present invention. The NATIONAL RETURN CENTER™ is such a central return facility that has been created by Returns Online, Inc. to efficiently service returned merchandise for a plurality of different merchants.

In some cases, a merchant might ship merchandise that was dropped off by the customer, to this central return facility. However, it is more likely that in most cases, the customer will be the party that ships the merchandise being returned to the return facility. As indicated in a block **16**, before any merchandise will be accepted, merchant **14** must authorize the return and transmit the return data to Returns Online, Inc. for inclusion in its database. It will be most convenient to transmit the data electronically, either over the Internet, or via a dedicated data line provided for each merchant who elects to use the central return services provided by Returns Online, Inc. The data transmitted to Returns Online, Inc. by a merchant who has authorized the return of merchandise will identify the customer who requested the return and the merchant authorizing the return, will indicate the address and other contact information for the customer, and will include a description of the merchandise that identifies all items that should be included.

Upon receiving the data from a merchant who has authorized the return of merchandise, Returns Online, Inc. will generate a return authorization shipping label as indicated in a block **18**. The shipping label will include a bar code identifying the merchant authorizing the return and including any other information that is relevant to processing the return of the merchandise. Included on the return authorization shipping label is the address for Returns Online, Inc. Other options for providing the return authorization shipping label are discussed below in greater detail. In addition, Returns Online, Inc. may include either a prepaid United States Postal Service Postage Permit or other private shipper forms that can be used by the customer returning the merchandise to facilitate shipment of the merchandise to Returns Online, Inc. These labels will be sent to each customer returning merchandise through conventional U.S. Postal Service mail or by email in an electronic form that can be printed by the customer, providing the appropriate printable bar-coded return authorization shipping label for facilitating shipment of the merchandise to Returns Online, Inc.

Upon receiving the return authorization label, as indicated in a block **20**, the customer will pack the merchandise to be returned in an appropriate container, apply the label to the container, and will then arrange for shipment of the merchandise to the central return facility of Returns Online, Inc. At the customer's option, the returned merchandise can be conveyed by the U.S. Postal Service using the U.S. Postal Service Postage Permit or by a private shipper. If using the U.S. Postal Service, the customer will leave the container at a postal drop box at the U.S. Post Office, or at the customer's mail box or doorstep. If a private shipper is elected, the shipper will likely pick up the container from the customer's residence or other location.

Returned merchandise shipped through the U.S. Postal Service or via a private shipper is received by Returns Online, Inc. at its central return facility, as indicated in a block **22**. A block **24** indicates that Returns Online, Inc. scans the return authorization label applied to the shipping container of merchandise that has been received. Based upon the merchant identified by the bar code on the shipping label, the container conveying the merchandise is sorted and transferred to an appropriate processor station.

At the processor station, as indicated in a block **26**, the contents of a shipping container are inspected and the processor verifies that the contents received in the container match the expected contents, based upon the data received from the merchant who authorized the return shipment. In addition, the processor assesses the condition of the merchandise. The processor produces a bar code tag that is applied to the merchandise or its container indicating the final disposition of the merchandise, in accord with instructions received from the merchant and depending upon the

assessed condition of the returned merchandise. The disposition indicated on the bar code tag is thus dependent upon the nature of the returned merchandise, the instructions from the merchant, and/or upon the condition of the returned merchandise.

If the contents of the container that was received match the expected merchandise, the processing station sends an electronic transmission to merchant **14** indicating that a complete return of the merchandise occurred, as indicated by the line from block **26** back to block **14**. Alternatively, the message may indicate that the return was incomplete or that the returned merchandise exhibits excessive wear or likely customer damage. Fraudulent returns are also detected at this point. The electronic message transmitted back to merchant **14** will thus indicate the condition of the returned merchandise. If the merchandise has been completely returned in an expected condition, the merchant will credit the customer's account for the returned merchandise, as indicated in a block **28**. Customer **10** receives the refund, as indicated by the line from block **28** back to block **10**.

However, it is contemplated that refunds can alternatively be credited to a customer's account for returned merchandise at any time during the process designated by a merchant. For example, when a customer initially requests authorization to return merchandise, the customer's account can be credited for the cost of the merchandise being returned or a check in the amount of the credit can be mailed to the customer. In the event that the merchandise is either not returned by the customer, or if some other condition established by the merchant such as the condition or completeness of the return is not met, the customer's account will be debited in the amount previously credited. If the credit was paid to the customer, an invoice for the amount of the credit will be sent to the customer, or the matter will be otherwise handled as the merchant involved has directed.

In a block **30**, the merchandise that has been inspected at the processor station is then conveyed by an automatic conveyer, which sorts and routes the merchandise to an appropriate station by automatically scanning the bar code tag that was applied to the container or merchandise in block **26**. In accord with a block **32**, the merchandise is directed to an appropriate temporary storage bin in which it is stored until it is subsequently disposed of as indicated on the bar code applied to the tag at the processing station.

Several exemplary options for disposing of returned merchandise are indicated in blocks **34–44**. Certain types of merchandise, by their nature, may not be completely reusable, but may include components that are sufficiently valuable to justify salvage, as indicated in a block **34**. For example, it may be too expensive to attempt to repair a defective returned electronic product, such as an electronic game. However, the display screen on such a product, if still operative, may comprise a substantial portion of the entire cost of the product when it was originally manufactured. Accordingly, valuable components of such a product can be salvaged for further use in new products being manufactured.

A block **36** indicates that certain goods will require repackaging or refurbishing, e.g., to replace a blister pack or other packaging destroyed when the customer originally opened the product prior to returning it. Repackaging and refurbishing the product will typically place the product in a saleable condition, assuming that it is not otherwise defective and has not been adversely affected by any use of the previous customer.

For other merchandise that is returned, there may be a substantial tax benefit to the merchant to donate the returned merchandise to a recognized charity, in accord with a block **38**. The merchant should then be able to take a tax write-off corresponding to the fair market value of the returned merchandise donated to a charitable organization. Some returned merchandise will have no further useful value upon being returned and will thus best be disposed in accord with accepted waste management practices, as indicated in a block **40**. Returned merchandise that is reusable and can be sold to another customer can alternatively be transmitted to a fulfiller/merchant, as indicated in a block **42**. In some cases, the retailer will mark such merchandise as "returned goods." However, other merchandise that has been returned can be sold "as new." For example, software that has been returned can likely be resold as new.

In other cases, the returned merchandise will be shipped to the original manufacturer, for possible use in manufacturing new goods of a related nature. This disposition option is noted in a block **44**.

Further details related to the processing of returned merchandise are illustrated in FIG. **2**. In this illustration, an exemplary container **50** is shown in which a customer has packed merchandise to be returned. The return of this merchandise has previously been authorized by a merchant, and having been advised of the authorization by the merchant, Returns Online, Inc. has provided the customer with a return authorization label **52** that includes the address for Returns Online, Inc. and a bar code that is scannable for identifying the merchant and merchandise being returned. Container **50** is then shipped via a private shipping company or through the U.S. Postal Service to a central return facility, i.e., to a loading dock **54**, which receives all of the packages returned from customers of merchants who are clients of Returns Online, Inc. From the loading dock, container **50** is directed to a receiving station where return authorization label **52** is scanned using a scanner **64***a*, so that the data included in the scannable bar code can be entered within a database maintained on a computer **56**. Scanner **64***a* is coupled to computer **56** via a lead **58**. Once the receiving station scans a return authorization label to identify the merchant who authorized the return, the container is sorted along with other returned merchandise received, based upon the information from the merchant who authorized the return of the merchandise. The container is then transferred to a processor station. The processor at this station inspects returned merchandise **62** inside a container **60** and rescans the return authorization shipping label with a scanner **64***b* that is connected to computer **56** through a lead **66**. The contents of container **50** are verified against the expected contents as indicated in the data stored in the database on computer **56**.

A bar code tag **71** indicating the disposition is applied to the returned merchandise or to container **60**, and container **60** and/or returned merchandise **62** is directed onto an automated conveyer system **70**. As the merchandise is moved by the conveyer system, the disposition indicated on bar code tag **71** is scanned using a scanner **64***c*, which is coupled through a lead **63** to a computer **68**. In response to the disposition indicated by scannable bar code tag **71**, computer **68** controls conveyer system **70** via control signals conveyed by a lead **65**, to direct the returned merchandise to an appropriate temporary storage bin selected from among bins **72–82**. Each of these bins is allocated to hold merchandise that has been assigned to a common disposition. Once a bin is filled, it is shipped for disposition as indicated on the bar code tag provided for all of the returned merchandise that it contains.

In FIG. **3**, the relationship between a central return facility **100** operated by Returns Online, Inc., the merchants that

make use of the facility, and the customers of those merchants is graphically illustrated. Central return facility **100** will service the returned merchandise for a plurality of different merchants including a clothing store **102** having customers **104**, a pet supplies Internet merchant **106** who sells pet supplies to customers **108**, a computers online vendor **110** who sells to customers **112**, a music store **114** that sells music CDs and videos to customers **116**, a drugstore **118** that sells to customers **120**, and an electronic goods store **122** that sells to customers **124**. It should be noted that the merchants used in this exemplary illustration are not in any way intended to limit the types of merchants that will use the central return facility provided in accord with the present invention. However, it should be noted that the merchants shown in this example are of both the "brick and mortar" type and of the "online" type that sell goods and services over the Internet.

Any of the customers of these client merchants may want to return merchandise purchased from any of the client merchants, e.g., due to improper fit, defects, wrong color, etc. Accordingly, a plurality of containers **130**, **132**, **134**, **136**, **138**, and **140** are illustrated in association with at least one customer of each client merchant. The customer of a merchant will have contacted the merchant for authorization to return merchandise. In each case, the container that is being returned includes merchandise purchased from a client merchant and is sent either via the U.S. Postal Service or through a private carrier to central return facility **100**, for example, to a facility operated by Returns Online. Inc.

Processing of merchandise that have been received by the central return facility is as described above. It should be noted that the status of any of the merchandise that is returned to central return facility **100**, once it has been received and its return authorization shipping label has been scanned, will be available online so that the merchant who has authorized the return can track the disposition of the merchandise received by central return facility **100**.

After the returned merchandise has been processed as described above, it is conveyed in a bin (along with other returned merchandise assigned the same disposition) to the assigned disposition. For example, returned merchandise that is to be donated to a charity are conveyed as indicated by an arrow **144**, using a delivery service, to a charitable institution such as a church **142**. Returned merchandise designated for disposal is shipped by a truck **146** to an appropriate waste disposal site. Repackaged/refurbished returned merchandise is shipped as indicated by an arrow **148**, prepaid to the merchant that authorized the return, such as electronic goods store **122**, where the returned merchandise is restocked for resale. Similarly, an arrow **150** indicates that returned merchandise designated for salvage is shipped to a salvage parts reseller.

Other dispositions discussed above are not illustrated in FIG. **3**, since space does not permit. However, it will be understood that in addition to the disposition options indicated, other options for disposition of returned merchandise can be implemented in accord with the present invention.

As noted above, several alternative approaches are contemplated in regard to the present invention for providing the shipping label that is bar-coded and for facilitating return of merchandise. FIG. **4** illustrates a first approach in which the customer **200** receives purchased merchandise **204** with which is included a return authorization code and prepaid shipping label **206** from a merchant **202**. In the approach shown in FIG. **4**, merchant **202** has elected to pre-authorize customers to return any purchased merchandise with which the customers are dissatisfied, without the need to obtain further authorization for the return. Thus, when a customer makes a purchase, the authorization to return that merchandise is automatically provided. If dissatisfied with purchased merchandise **204** for any reason, customer **200** simply repackages the goods, applies return authorization bar code and prepaid shipping label **206**, and arranges for shipment of returned merchandise **208** to NATIONAL RETURN, CENTER™ **210**, as described above.

FIG. **5** illustrates a more likely approach for handling the authorization to return merchandise. As shown in this Figure, customer **200** either contacts a merchant web site **212** over the Internet or alternatively, telephones a merchant call center **214** and is connected with an operator. If the customer contacts the merchant web site, an interactive form will be provided that enables the customer to provide the same information solicited by the operator if the customer had instead called the merchant call center. In either case, the customer requests authorization to return merchandise previously purchased and indicates why the merchandise should be returned.

For each type of merchandise, a plurality of different codes will be provided, each associated with a different potential reason for returning the merchandise. For example, a different code will be associated with reasons such as: Repair/Service Merchandise, Damaged/Defective Product, Wrong Fit, Error in Product Supplied (e.g., wrong color, fit, or product), Don't Want, Didn't Match Description or Picture, Arrived too Late, etc. A return authorization engine **216** will be provided to compare the code associated with the customer's reason for returning the merchandise with rules that have been predefined as justifying a return, exchange, or other resolution. Typically, these rules will be established by the merchant from whom the customer purchased the merchandise. If the coded reason for making the return satisfies the predefined rules, the return authorization engine will automatically send return authorization bar code and prepaid shipping label **206** to the customer. If the customer wants to make an exchange, an operator handling the communication with the customer at a call center (or the customer, if the customer has contacted the manufacturer's web site) will preferably be automatically routed to an order page to enable the customer to order replacement merchandise.

The return authorization bar code and prepaid shipping label required for returning merchandise can either be sent through the mail, or can be provided as a printable attachment to an e-mail, enabling the customer to print the label. This e-mail may include additional messages and/or incentive coupons. Customer **200** then applies the return authorization bar code and prepaid shipping label to a container **222** in which the merchandise being returned is packed, and arranges for shipment of the merchandise to the NATIONAL RETURN CENTER™, as explained above.

Yet another approach for providing the return authorization bar code and prepaid shipping label and authorizing the return of merchandise is illustrated in FIGS. **6A** and **6B**. This approach is a combination of the preceding two approaches. As shown in FIG. **6A**, the customer receives the return authorization bar code and prepaid shipping label with the purchased merchandise at the time a purchase is made. However, as shown in FIG. **6B**, the customer is required to obtain authorization prior to returning, the merchandise. Just as discussed in connection with FIG. **5**, the customer must contact either merchant web site **212** or merchant call center **214** to request authorization to return the merchandise. If the reason given by the customer satisfies the predefined rules,

the return authorization engine provides the authorization for the return of the merchandise, as indicated in a block **222**. Conversely, if the reason provided by the customer does not satisfy the predefined rules, the return is not authorized, as indicated in a block **224**. Only if customer **200** has been authorized to make a return of the merchandise will returned merchandise **206** be accepted by NATIONAL RETURN CENTER™ **220**. When properly authorized to make a return of the merchandise, the customer will apply the return authorization bar code and prepaid shipping label that was provided with the merchandise when purchased and arrange for shipment of the merchandise to the NATIONAL RETURN CENTER™ as previously noted above.

Although the present invention has been described in connection with the preferred form of practicing it and modifications thereto, those of ordinary skill in the art will understand that many other modifications can be made to the present invention within the scope of the claims that follow. Accordingly, it is not intended that the scope of the invention in any way be limited by the above description, but instead be determined entirely by reference to the claims that follow.

The invention in which an exclusive right is claimed is defined by the following:

1. A method for handling returned merchandise on behalf of a plurality of different merchants, comprising the steps of:

(a) enabling a merchant to transmit data to a central database identifying merchandise that might be returned by a customer, said data identifying the merchant and the merchandise, and including contact information for the customer;

(b) providing a return shipping label to the customer for use in returning the merchandise, said return label including information referencing at least a portion of the data stored in the central database;

(c) entering at least part of the information included on the return shipping label into the central database upon receipt of merchandise returned by the customer, to indicate that the merchandise being returned has been received;

(d) assessing a condition of the merchandise that was received and associating a tag with said merchandise indicating a disposition thereof;

(e) automatically routing the merchandise to a station for implementing the disposition of the merchandise, as indicated by the tag; and

(f) disposing of the merchandise, as indicated by the tag.

2. The method of claim **1**, wherein the return shipping label comprises a scannable code, and wherein the step of entering at least part of the information comprises the step of scanning the return shipping label.

3. The method of claim **1**, wherein the tag associated with the merchandise comprises a scannable code, and wherein the step of automatically routing the merchandise comprises the step of scanning the tag to determine the disposition of the merchandise and thereby controlling the automatic routing of the merchandise.

4. The method of claim **1**, wherein the station comprises a storage repository designated to hold returned merchandise that have all been allocated for a common disposition.

5. The method of claim **1**, further comprising the step of electronically reporting receipt of the merchandise that was returned, to the merchant that transmitted the data identifying the merchandise, and indicating a condition and a disposition of the merchandise to said merchant.

6. The method of claim **1**, further comprising the step of enabling the customer to selectively return the merchandise by one of a postal shipment and a shipping service.

7. The method of claim **1**, further comprising the step of providing a notice to the merchant indicating a status of the merchandise that has been returned at any step in the handling of the returned merchandise requested by the merchant.

8. The method of claim **1**, further comprising the step of electronically posting a status report on a network accessible by the merchant, indicating the status of the merchandise that has been returned.

9. The method of claim **1**, wherein the disposition of the merchandise includes at least one of:

(a) salvaging at least one useful component from the merchandise and discarding a remainder of the merchandise that was returned;

(b) refurbishing and repackaging the merchandise that was returned for resale;

(c) donating the merchandise that was returned to benefit a selected charity;

(d) discarding the merchandise in an appropriate waste disposal facility;

(e) returning the merchandise to inventory for resale; and

(f) returning the merchandise to a manufacturer of the merchandise.

10. The method of claim **1**, further comprising the step enabling a refund to the customer returning merchandise at any point during the return and the handling of the returned merchandise, as specified by the merchant.

11. The method of claim **1**, wherein the step of providing the return shipping label comprises the step of sending the return shipping label to the customer only after return of the merchandise has been authorized.

12. The method of claim **1**, wherein the step of providing the return shipping label comprises the step of including the return shipping label with the merchandise when the merchandise was purchased by the customer.

13. The method of claim **1**, wherein the step of providing the return shipping label comprises the step of sending an email to the customer to which is attached a printable return shipping label.

14. The method of claim **1**, wherein the step of providing the return shipping label comprises the step of automatically providing the return shipping label to the customer, but only if predetermined conditions set by the merchant are met.

15. A method for facilitating return of merchandise by customers of a plurality of different merchants, comprising the steps of:

(a) receiving electronically transmitted data regarding return authorizations from each merchant that were provided to customers of the merchants, said data for each return authorization identifying a customer, the merchandise authorized to be returned, and a merchant authorizing return of the merchandise;

(b) producing shipping labels, each shipping label including a scannable code referencing the data regarding a return authorization for return of merchandise authorized by a merchant and which includes an address to which the merchandise is to be shipped when being returned;

(c) providing the shipping labels to the customers for application to shipping containers in which the merchandise is to be returned;

(d) receiving the merchandise that was returned by the customers;

(e) scanning the shipping labels of the merchandise that has been received and sorting said merchandise based

upon the merchant that is identified on each shipping label as having authorized the return of the merchandise;

(f) assessing contents of the shipping containers to determine a condition of the merchandise in each shipping container, and to assign a disposition for the merchandise;

(g) producing scannable tags that are associated with the merchandise, said scannable tags indicating the disposition of the merchandise that was received;

(h) automatically sorting and routing the merchandise to temporary storage, by scanning the tags associated with the merchandise to determine the disposition assigned, a different temporary storage being provided for each different type of disposition assigned to the merchandise; and

(i) disposing of the merchandise temporarily stored in accord with the disposition assigned to the merchandise.

16. The method of claim **15**, wherein each different temporary storage comprises a bin, further comprising the step of transferring the bin and merchandise temporarily stored therein to a site that implements the disposition of the merchandise in accord with the disposition that was assigned to the merchandise temporarily stored in the bin.

17. The method of claim **15**, wherein the step of assessing is implemented at a plurality of processor stations; and wherein the step of assigning a disposition comprises the step of acting in accord with instructions provided by the merchant who originally sold the merchandise to which the disposition is being assigned.

18. The method of claim **15**, wherein the step of disposing of the merchandise comprises at least one of the steps of:

(a) salvaging any usable components from the merchandise;

(b) repackaging the merchandise;

(c) transferring the merchandise to a charitable organization;

(d) depositing the merchandise at an appropriate waste disposal site;

(e) restocking the merchandise for resale; and

(f) returning the merchandise to a manufacturer of the merchandise.

19. The method of claim **15**, further comprising the step of verifying the merchandise against the data to ensure that the merchandise returned is complete and is merchandise for which return was authorized by the merchant.

20. The method of claim **19**, further comprising the step of notifying the merchant who authorized return of the merchandise, of results of the step of verifying.

21. The method of claim **15**, wherein the step of automatically sorting and routing is implemented with automatically controlled conveyors.

22. The method of claim **15**, wherein the step of providing the shipping labels comprises one of the steps of:

(a) including a shipping label with the merchandise at the time of sale of the merchandise, authorization for the customer to return the merchandise if dissatisfied for any reason being then provided by the merchant;

(b) including a shipping label with the merchandise at the time of sale of the merchandise, but requiring the customer to obtain authorization to return the merchandise before using the shipping label to return the merchandise; and

(c) sending a shipping label to a customer only after authorization to return the merchandise has been requested by the customer and has been granted.

23. The method of claim **15**, further comprising the step of providing to a merchant an online status of merchandise being returned by a customer.

24. A method for expediting handling of merchandise purchased from a plurality of different merchants that is being returned by customers, comprising the steps of:

(a) providing a receiving facility for accepting returned merchandise at a defined address;

(b) receiving electronically transmitted data from each merchant who has authorized return of merchandise, said data identifying the merchandise authorized to be returned and the merchant that authorized return of the merchandise;

(c) providing bar-coded shipping labels to customers for use when the customers have been authorized to return merchandise, said bar-coded shipping labels including the defined address and indicating the merchandise and the merchant authorizing the return;

(d) receiving returned merchandise from customers and scanning the bar-coded labels to identify the merchandise and the merchants authorizing return of the merchandise;

(e) sorting returned merchandise received based on the merchant who authorized return of said merchandise;

(f) assessing a condition of the merchandise received and comparing the merchandise received to the data received from the merchants;

(g) automatically assigning a disposition of the merchandise received based upon the condition of the merchandise; and

(h) disposing of the merchandise received in accord with the disposition assigned.

25. The method of claim **24**, further comprising the step of advising the merchant whether the merchandise received from a customer corresponds to the merchandise authorized to be returned.

26. The method of claim **24**, further comprising the step of issuing a credit to the customer for return of the merchandise.

27. The method of claim **24**, wherein the step of automatically assigning the disposition of the merchandise is carried out in accord with instructions provided by the merchants.

28. The method of claim **24**, wherein the step of providing the bar-coded shipping labels comprises one of the following steps:

(a) providing a bar-coded shipping label when the customer purchases merchandise, said customer being then authorized to return the merchandise at that time if dissatisfied with the merchandise;

(b) providing a bar-coded shipping label when the customer purchases merchandise, said customer being required to request and receive authorization to return the merchandise before using the bar-coded shipping label to return the merchandise; and

(c) providing a bar-coded shipping label to a customer after the customer has requested and been granted authorization to return the merchandise.

29. The method of claim **24**, wherein the step of providing the bar-coded shipping labels comprises the steps of electronically sending a bar-coded shipping label to a customer

and enabling the customer to print the bar-coded shipping label.

30. The method of claim **24**, further comprising the step of authorizing a customer to return merchandise only if a condition established by the merchant from whom the merchandise was purchased has been met.

31. The method of claim **24**, further comprising the step of crediting an account of a customer who is returning merchandise for a value of the merchandise being returned, when specified by the merchant from whom the customer purchased the merchandise.

32. The method of claim **31**, further comprising the step of debiting the account of the customer previously credited for the value of the merchandise being returned, if a condition established by the merchant for the return is subsequently found not to have been met after the step of assessing the condition of the returned merchandise.

* * * * *

APPENDIX C

"Cattron Acquires Theimeg"; Modern Materials Handling; Boston; October 2000
("*ReturnValet1*")

MODERN Materials Handling

Cattron acquires Theimeg

Anonymous. **Modern Materials Handling**. Boston: Oct 2000.Vol.55, Iss. 11; pg. 26, 1 pgs

Author(s):	Anonymous
Publication title:	Modern Materials Handling. Boston: Oct 2000. Vol. 55, Iss. 11; pg. 26, 1 pgs
Source type:	Periodical
ISSN/ISBN:	00268038
ProQuest document ID:	62810741
Text Word Count	331
Document URL:	http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=62810741&sid=2&Fmt=3&clientId=19649&RQT=309&VName=PQD

Full Text (331 words)

As most online consumers have already discovered, product returns usually come with a headache. Fortunately, there is a new remedy available to relieve some of the pain.

Newgistics, Inc., R.R. Donnelley Logistics Services, and USF Processors have formed a strategic alliance to create the most extensive and comprehensive returns management network for e-commerce and catalog companies.

Through a service called **ReturnValet**, the three companies offer direct-to-consumer merchants a more customerfriendly and cost-effective way of handling product returns.

ReturnValet (which operates for over 225 retailers, wholesalers, and manufacturers) enables consumers to go back to the online retailer where they bougnt the product, linking them to the Newgistics Web site, www.newgistics.com. There, the customer will receive information regarding the location of the nearest postal center where they can go and return the product - receiving instant credit.

"Consumers have indicated that they prefer to return products physically and get credit immediately>' says Kevin Sheehan, president and chief executive officer of USF Processors, who believes that the face-to-face customer service from the convenient local storefronts will offer a more positive returns experience. A fully customized returns solution also handles the unique needs of each merchant.

There are currently 4,000 postal centers, only in the U.S., ready for operation to begin late November or early

December says Sheehan.

The **ReturnValet** alliance leverages the strengths of each company.

Newgistics has a Webenabled network of easy-tofind neighborhood storefronts.

R.R donnelley Logistics, manages a nationwide network for pick-up and transportation of the returned items from the neighborhood return centers and has extensive experience working with leading catalogers and eretailers.

USF Processors operates more than 80 strategically located returns management warehouses to efficiently handle the needs of each merchant.

"We will make it easier for catalog and e-retail customers to return merchandise through this strategic alliance;' says Josh Hatfield, logistics manager for Garden.com, one of Newgistics' first customers.

"Our commitment to provide our customers the best pipeline-to-the-home solution for delivery of their parcels now includes an innovative returns solution."

More Like This - Find similar documents

Language: ☐ English

Publication title: ☐ Modern Materials Handling

Search Clear

^ Back to Top « Back to Results < Previous Document 30 of 35 Next > Publisher Information

Print Email ☐ Mark Document Citation , Full Text , Page Image - PDF

APPENDIX D

U.S. Patent Application Publication No. 2004/0172260 issued to Junger et al. ("*Junger*")

US 20040172260A1

(19) United States

(12) Patent Application Publication (10) Pub. No.: US 2004/0172260 A1

Junger et al. (43) Pub. Date: Sep. 2, 2004

(54) METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR ENABLING PURCHASERS OF PRODUCTS TO OBTAIN RETURN INFORMATION AND TO INITIATE PRODUCT RETURNS VIA AN ON-LINE NETWORK CONNECTION

(76) Inventors: **Peter J. Junger**, Redmond, WA (US); **Cassandra B. Shoecraft**, Redmond, WA (US); **David G. Koon**, Remond, WA (US)

Correspondence Address:
Nixon & Vanderhye
8th Floor
1100 North Glebe Road
Arlington, VA 22201-4714 (US)

(21) Appl. No.: **10/275,548**

(22) PCT Filed: **May 8, 2001**

(86) PCT No.: **PCT/US01/14694**

Related U.S. Application Data

(60) Provisional application No. 60/203,933, filed on May 12, 2000.

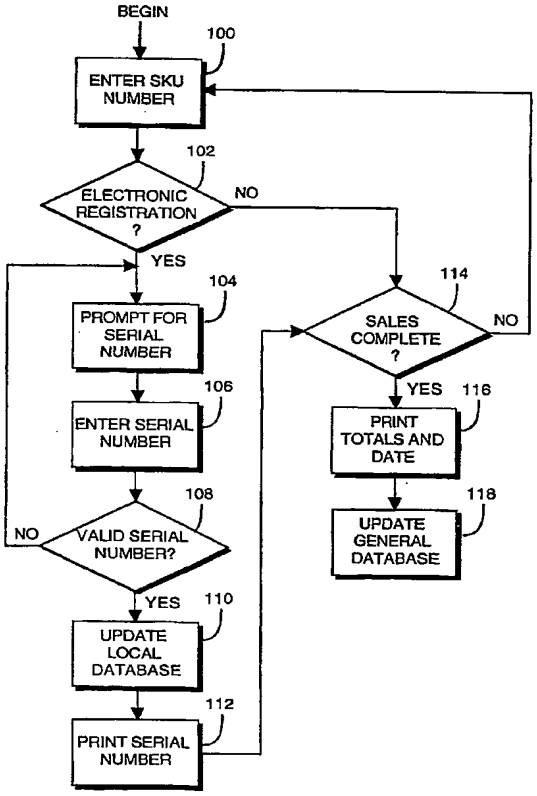
Publication Classification

(51) **Int. Cl.**[7] **G06F 17/60**

(52) **U.S. Cl.** **705/1**

(57) **ABSTRACT**

An electronic registration system facilitates authorized product returns and reduces the incidence of improper returns. A retailer sales associate is prompted to enter individual product identification information such as an individual serial number. This individual product identification information is then stored in a data base along with the date on which the product was sold and an appropriate UPC code, SKU number or manufacturer code. A check digit algorithm may be used to verify the serial number prior to storage. A sales receipt may be imprinted with at least the date of the transaction and the serial number. When a product is returned, the retailer may cross-reference the serial number on the product with that on the receipt to verify the sales receipt. Otherwise, the database may be searched for pertinent sales information. A customer may also access a return authorization engine via the Internet to obtain return approval, an authorization number, return instructions, etc. to reduce retailer hassle.



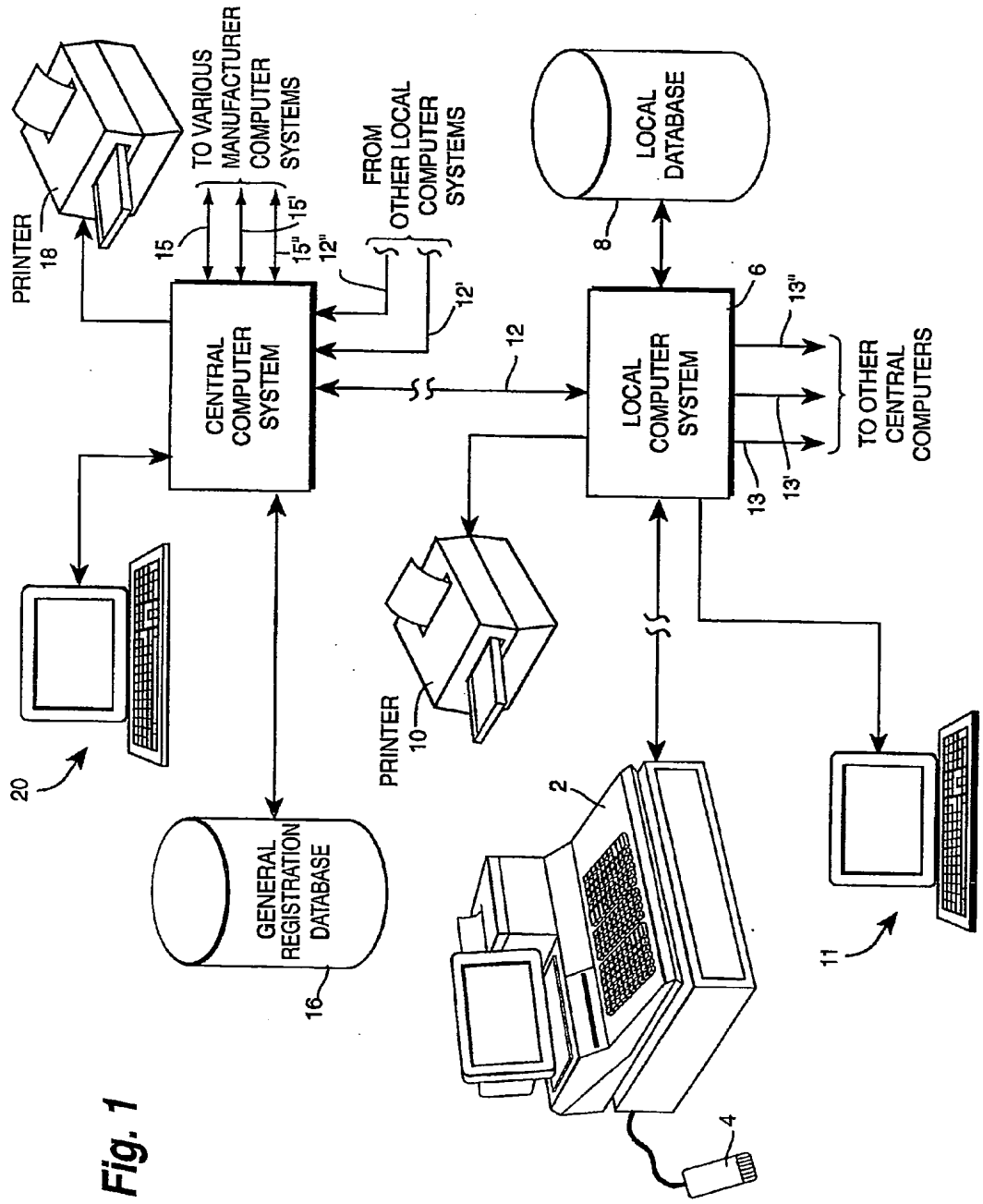

PRINTER
18
TO VARIOUS MANUFACTURER COMPUTER SYSTEMS
FROM OTHER LOCAL COMPUTER SYSTEMS
LOCAL DATABASE
8
15
15'
15"
12"
12'
CENTRAL COMPUTER SYSTEM
12
LOCAL COMPUTER SYSTEM
6
13"
TO OTHER CENTRAL COMPUTERS
13
13'
20
PRINTER
10
2
GENERAL REGISTRATION DATABASE
16
11
4

Fig. 1

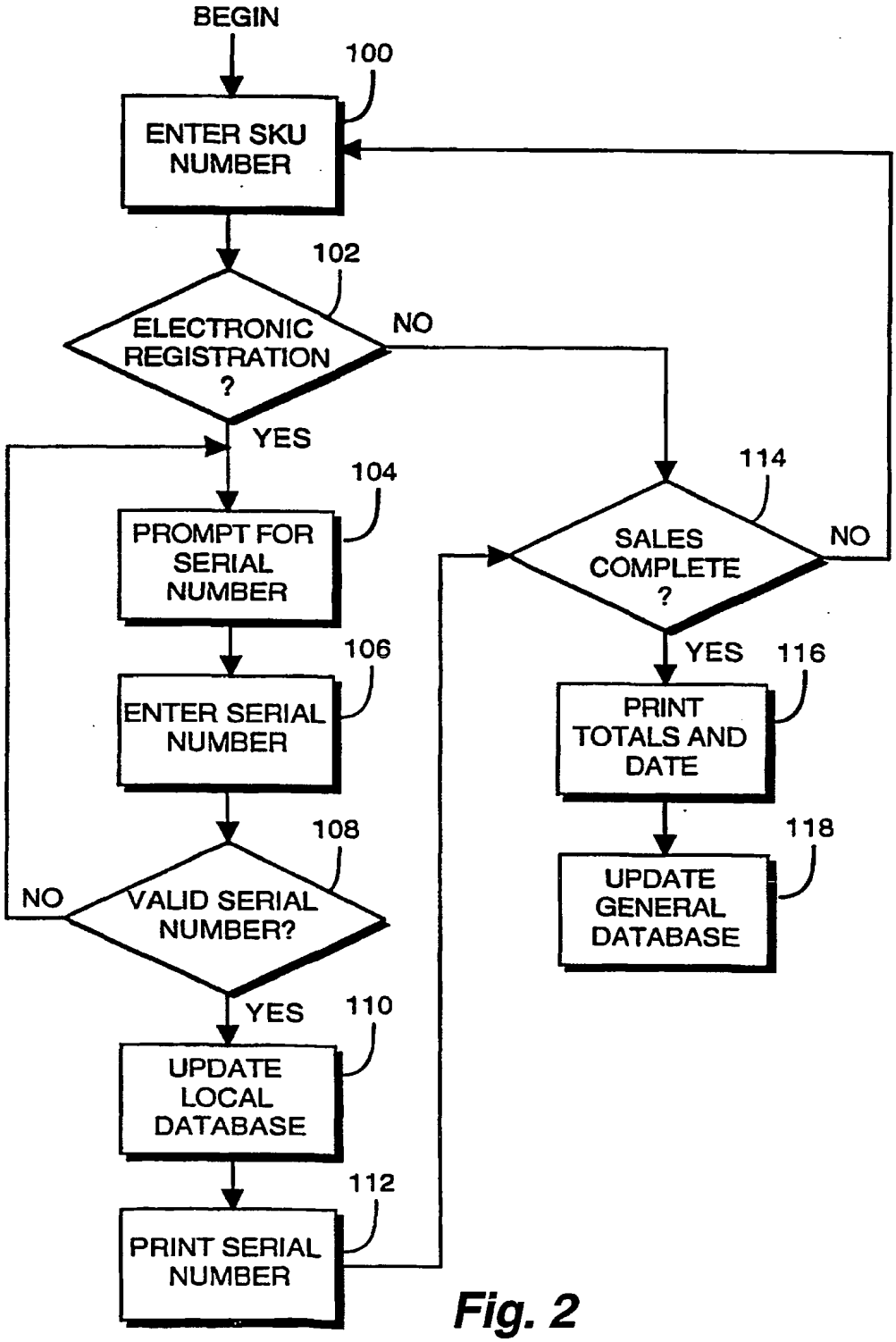

BEGIN
100
ENTER SKU NUMBER
102
ELECTRONIC REGISTRATION ?
NO
YES
104
PROMPT FOR SERIAL NUMBER
106
ENTER SERIAL NUMBER
108
NO
VALID SERIAL NUMBER?
YES
110
UPDATE LOCAL DATABASE
112
PRINT SERIAL NUMBER
114
SALES COMPLETE ?
NO
YES
116
PRINT TOTALS AND DATE
118
UPDATE GENERAL DATABASE

Fig. 2

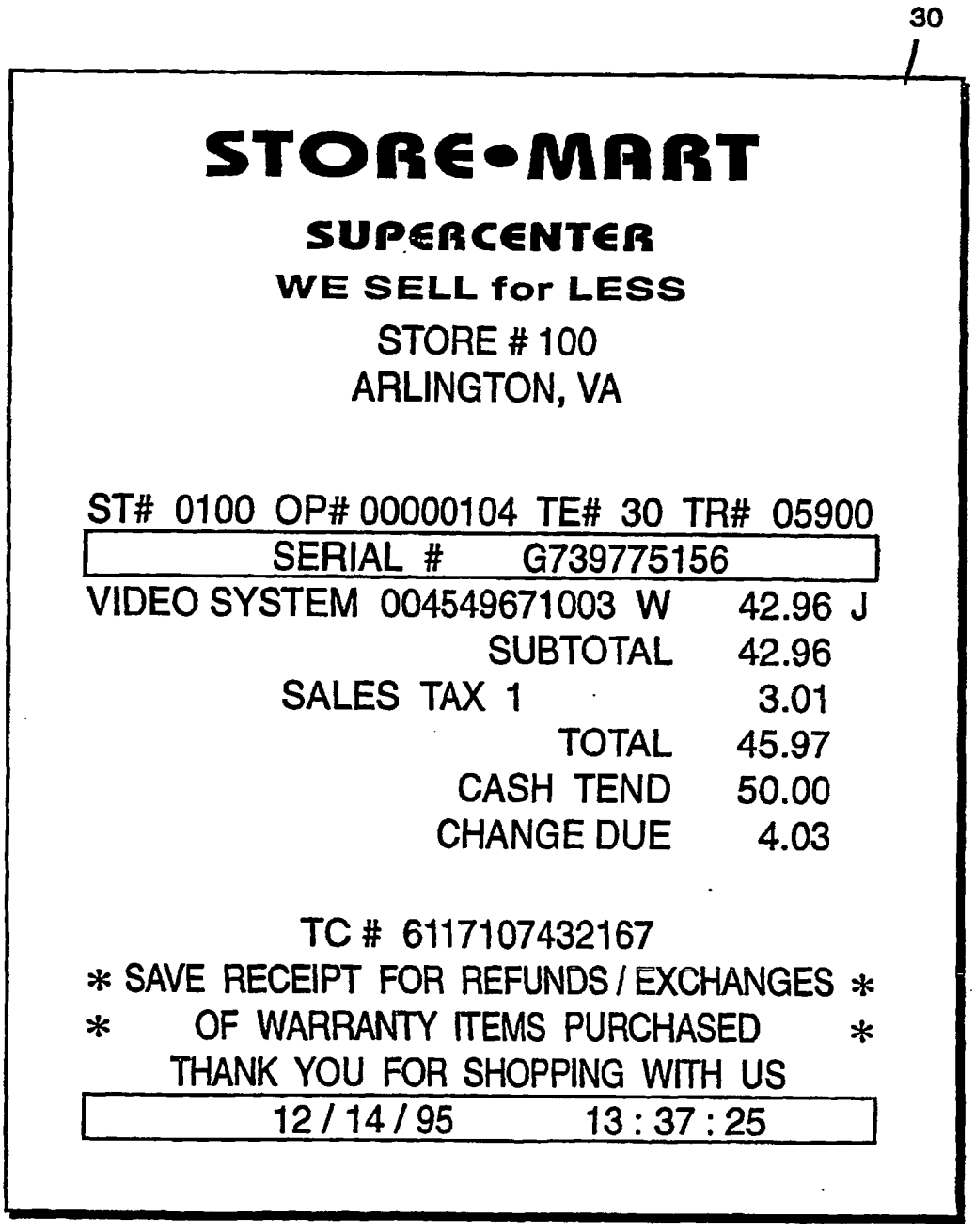

30
STORE•MART
SUPERCENTER
WE SELL for LESS
STORE # 100
ARLINGTON, VA
ST# 0100 OP# 00000104 TE# 30 TR# 05900
SERIAL # G739775156
VIDEO SYSTEM 004549671003 W 42.96 J
SUBTOTAL 42.96
SALES TAX 1 3.01
TOTAL 45.97
CASH TEND 50.00
CHANGE DUE 4.03
TC # 6117107432167
* SAVE RECEIPT FOR REFUNDS / EXCHANGES *
* OF WARRANTY ITEMS PURCHASED *
THANK YOU FOR SHOPPING WITH US
12 / 14 / 95 13 : 37 : 25

Fig. 3

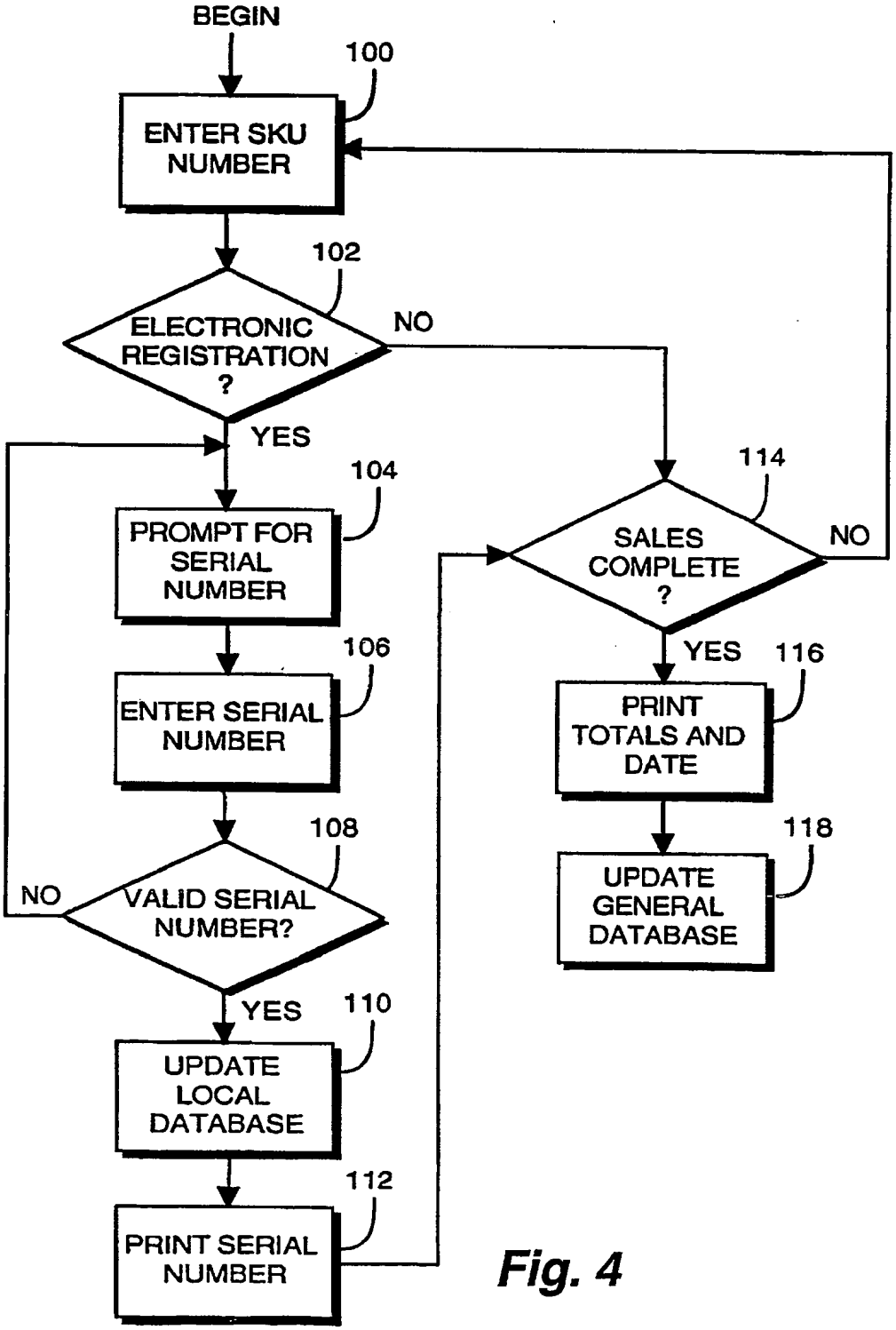
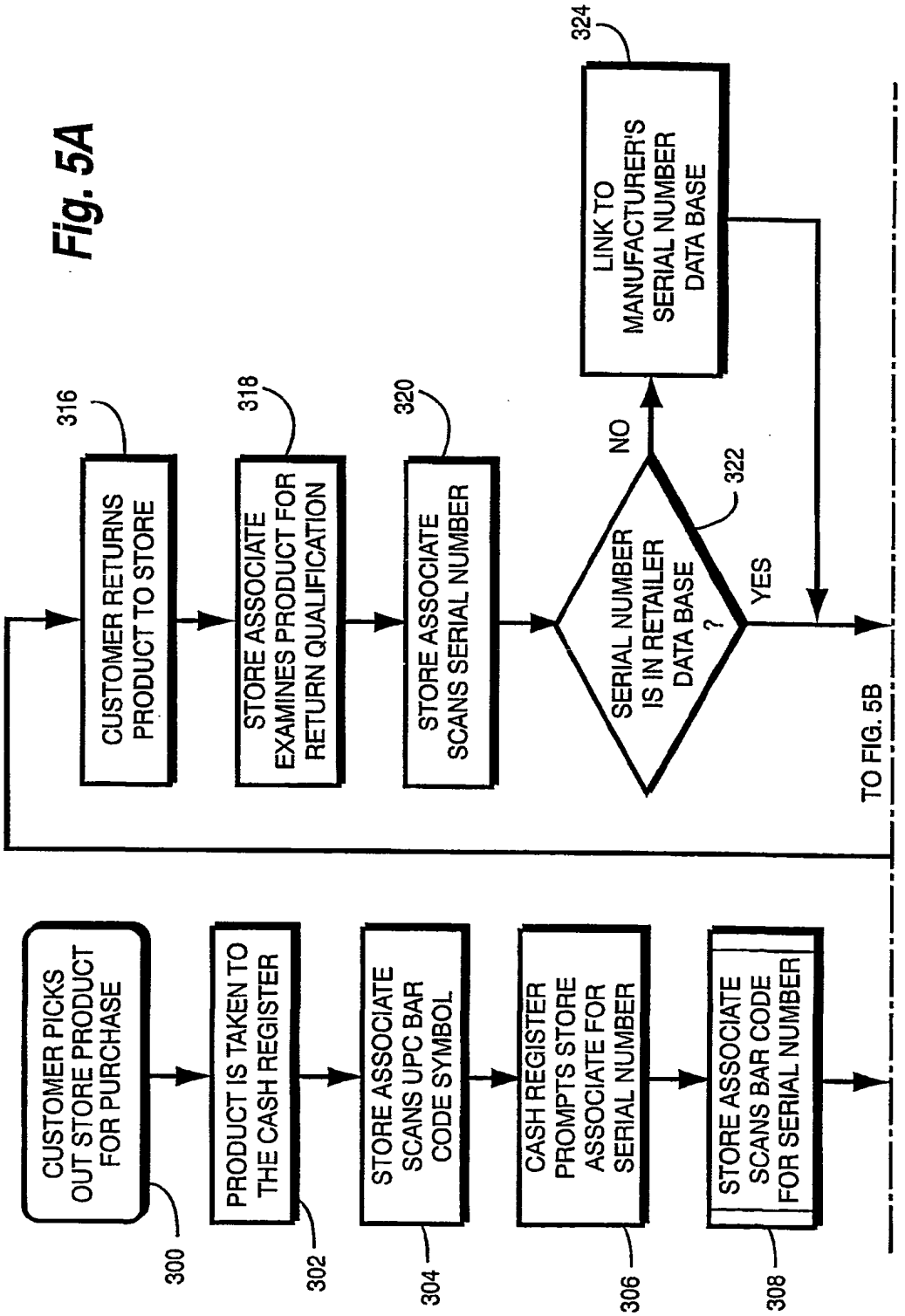

BEGIN
100
ENTER SKU NUMBER
102
ELECTRONIC REGISTRATION ?
NO
YES
104
PROMPT FOR SERIAL NUMBER
106
ENTER SERIAL NUMBER
108
VALID SERIAL NUMBER?
NO
YES
110
UPDATE LOCAL DATABASE
112
PRINT SERIAL NUMBER
114
SALES COMPLETE ?
NO
YES
116
PRINT TOTALS AND DATE
118
UPDATE GENERAL DATABASE

Fig. 4

Fig. 5A


CUSTOMER PICKS OUT STORE PRODUCT FOR PURCHASE
300
PRODUCT IS TAKEN TO THE CASH REGISTER
302
STORE ASSOCIATE SCANS UPC BAR CODE SYMBOL
304
CASH REGISTER PROMPTS STORE ASSOCIATE FOR SERIAL NUMBER
306
STORE ASSOCIATE SCANS BAR CODE FOR SERIAL NUMBER
308
TO FIG. 5B
CUSTOMER RETURNS PRODUCT TO STORE
316
STORE ASSOCIATE EXAMINES PRODUCT FOR RETURN QUALIFICATION
318
STORE ASSOCIATE SCANS SERIAL NUMBER
320
SERIAL NUMBER IS IN RETAILER DATA BASE ?
322
NO
YES
LINK TO MANUFACTURER'S SERIAL NUMBER DATA BASE
324

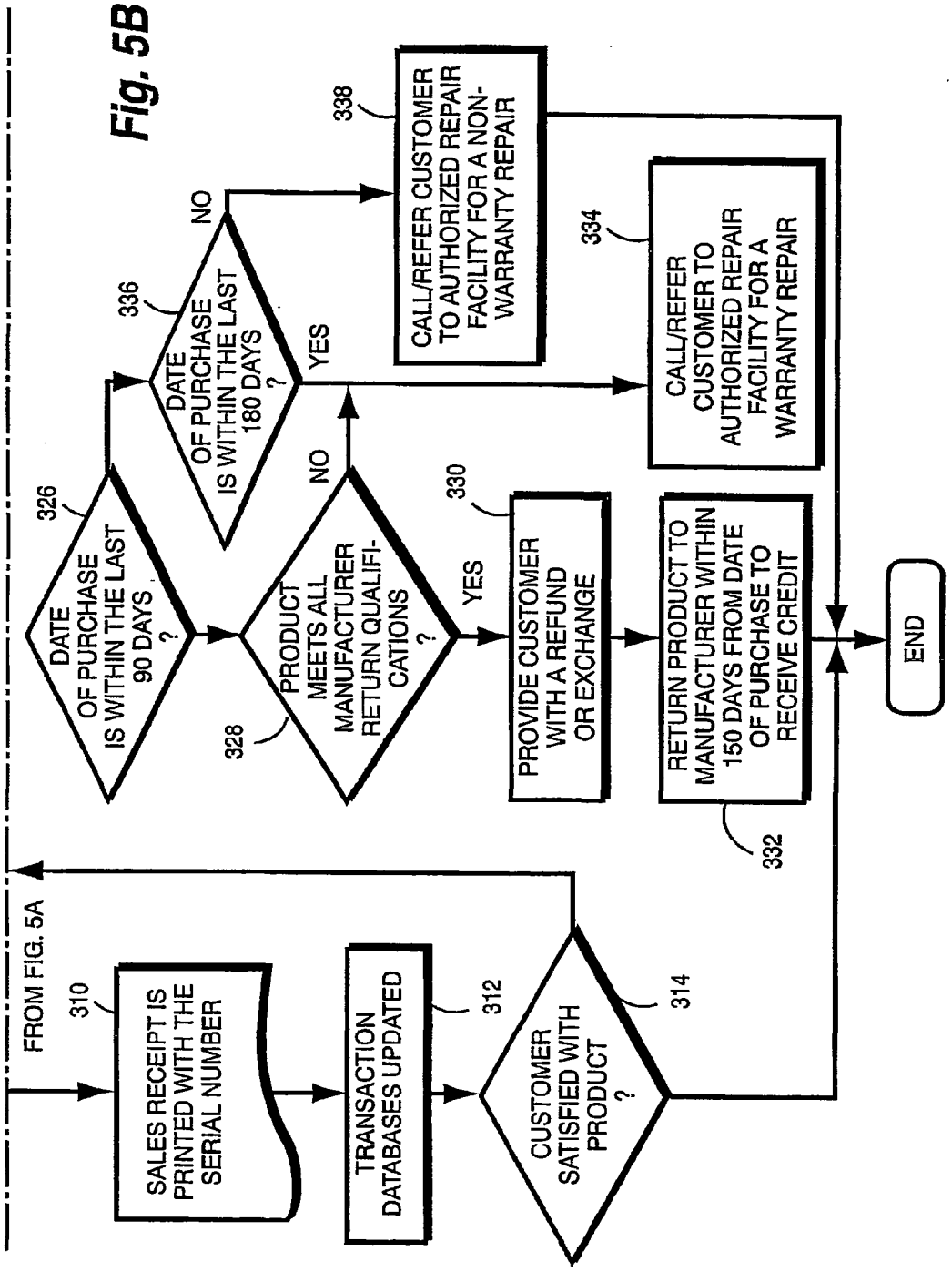
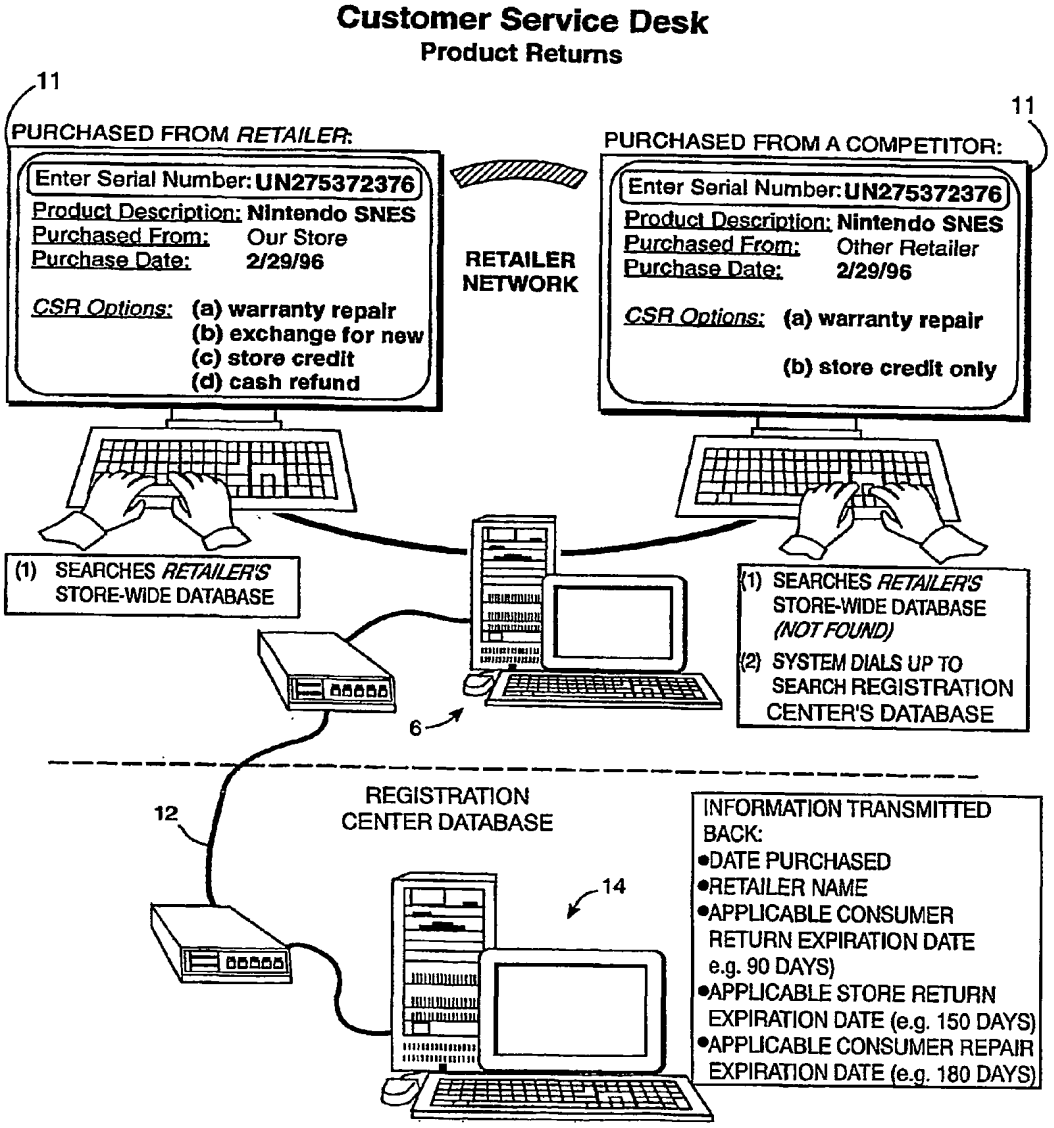

FROM FIG. 5A
310
SALES RECEIPT IS PRINTED WITH THE SERIAL NUMBER
TRANSACTION DATABASES UPDATED
312
CUSTOMER SATISFIED WITH PRODUCT ?
314
326
DATE OF PURCHASE IS WITHIN THE LAST 90 DAYS ?
328
PRODUCT MEETS ALL MANUFACTURER RETURN QUALIFI-CATIONS ?
330
PROVIDE CUSTOMER WITH A REFUND OR EXCHANGE
332
RETURN PRODUCT TO MANUFACTURER WITHIN 150 DAYS FROM DATE OF PURCHASE TO RECEIVE CREDIT
334
CALL/REFER CUSTOMER TO AUTHORIZED REPAIR FACILITY FOR A WARRANTY REPAIR
336
DATE OF PURCHASE IS WITHIN THE LAST 180 DAYS ?
338
CALL/REFER CUSTOMER TO AUTHORIZED REPAIR FACILITY FOR A NON-WARRANTY REPAIR
NO
YES
NO
YES
END

Fig. 5B

Fig. 6


Customer Service Desk
Product Returns
11
PURCHASED FROM RETAILER:
Enter Serial Number: UN275372376
Product Description: Nintendo SNES
Purchased From: Our Store
Purchase Date: 2/29/96
CSR Options: (a) warranty repair
(b) exchange for new
(c) store credit
(d) cash refund
RETAILER NETWORK
11
PURCHASED FROM A COMPETITOR:
Enter Serial Number: UN275372376
Product Description: Nintendo SNES
Purchased From: Other Retailer
Purchase Date: 2/29/96
CSR Options: (a) warranty repair
(b) store credit only
(1) SEARCHES RETAILER'S STORE-WIDE DATABASE
(1) SEARCHES RETAILER'S STORE-WIDE DATABASE (NOT FOUND)
(2) SYSTEM DIALS UP TO SEARCH REGISTRATION CENTER'S DATABASE
6
12
REGISTRATION CENTER DATABASE
14
INFORMATION TRANSMITTED BACK:
•DATE PURCHASED
•RETAILER NAME
•APPLICABLE CONSUMER RETURN EXPIRATION DATE e.g. 90 DAYS)
•APPLICABLE STORE RETURN EXPIRATION DATE (e.g. 150 DAYS)
•APPLICABLE CONSUMER REPAIR EXPIRATION DATE (e.g. 180 DAYS)

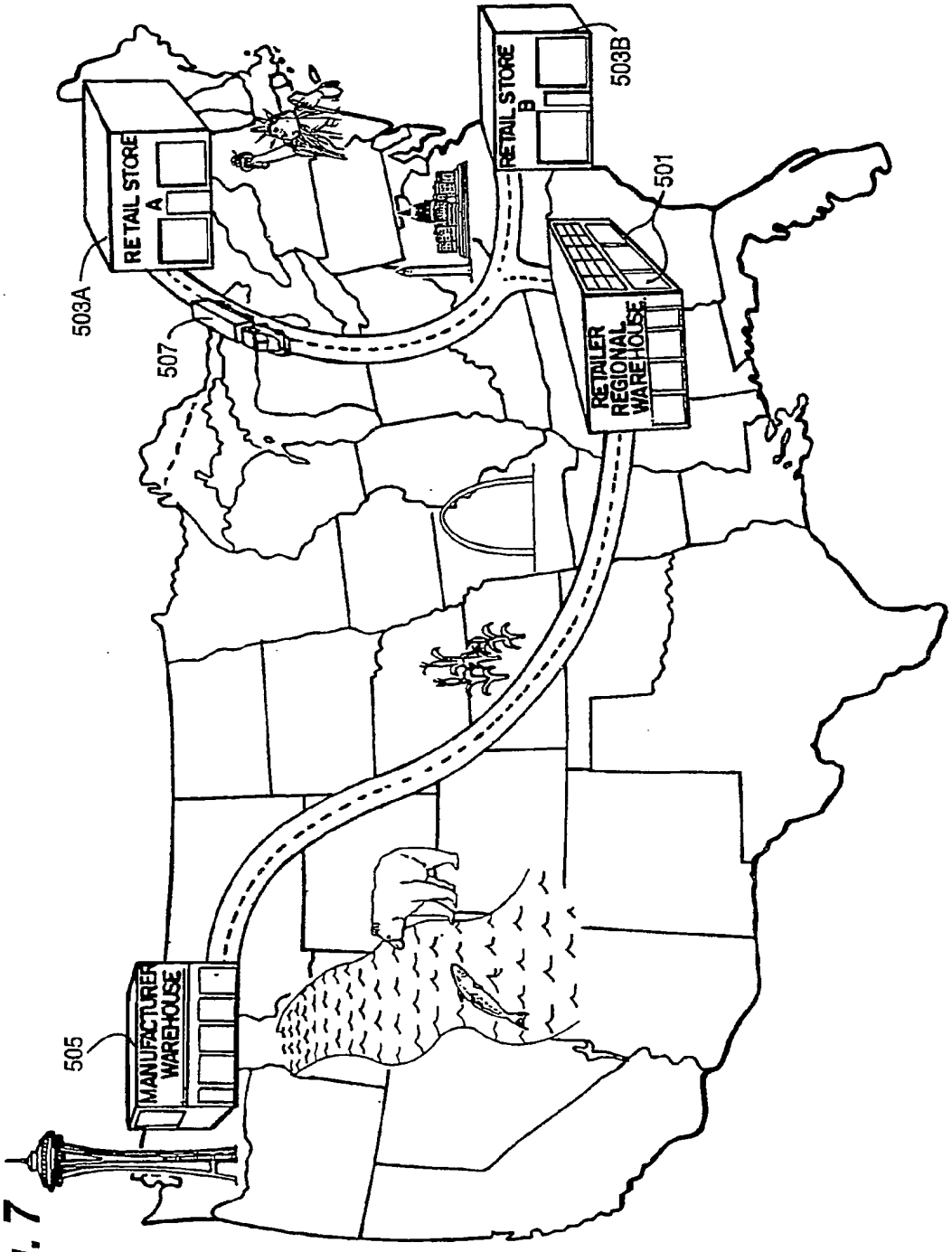

RETAIL STORE A
503A
RETAIL STORE B
503B
501
507
RETAILER REGIONAL WAREHOUSE
505
MANUFACTURER WAREHOUSE

Fig. 7

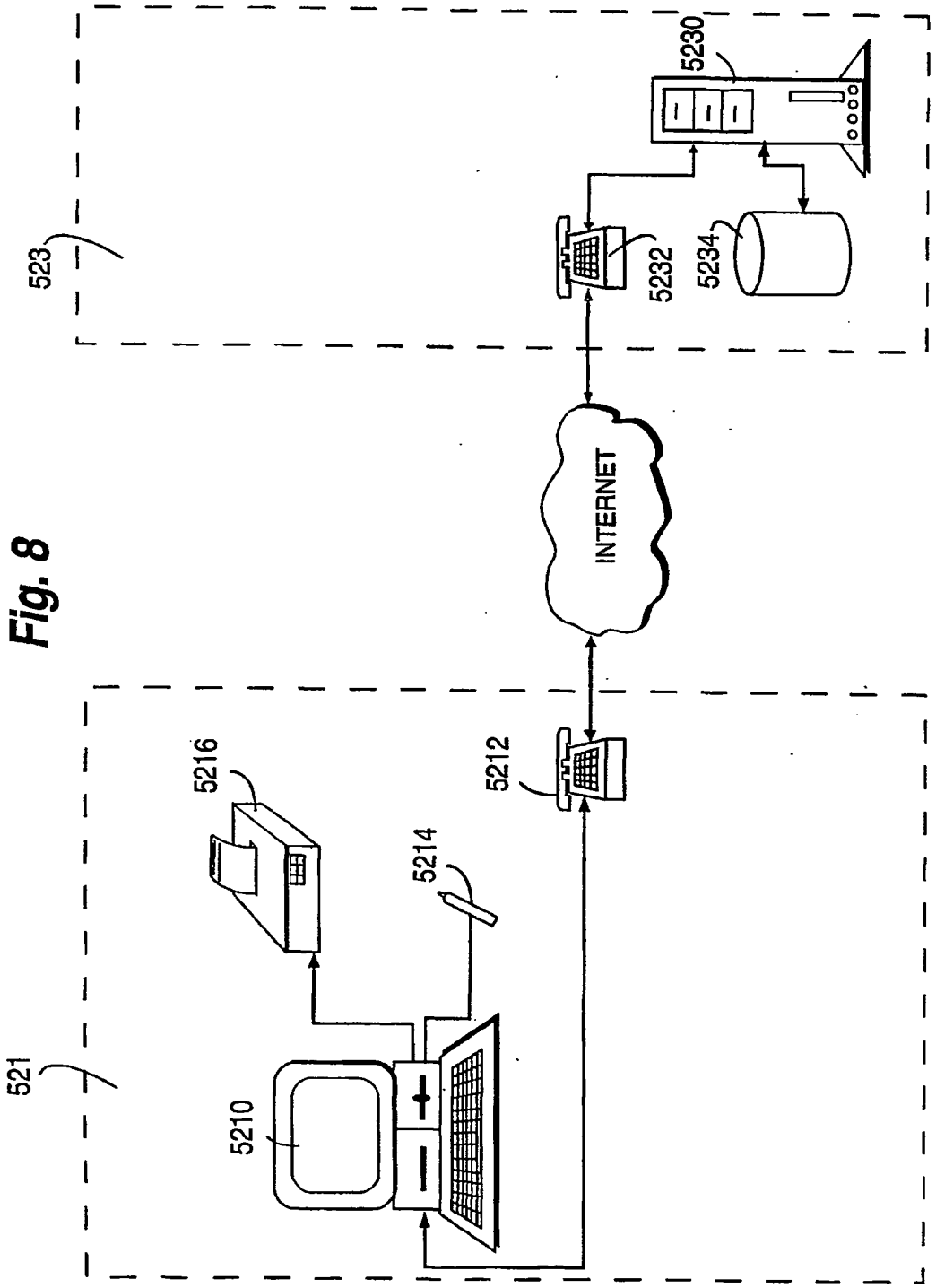


Fig. 8

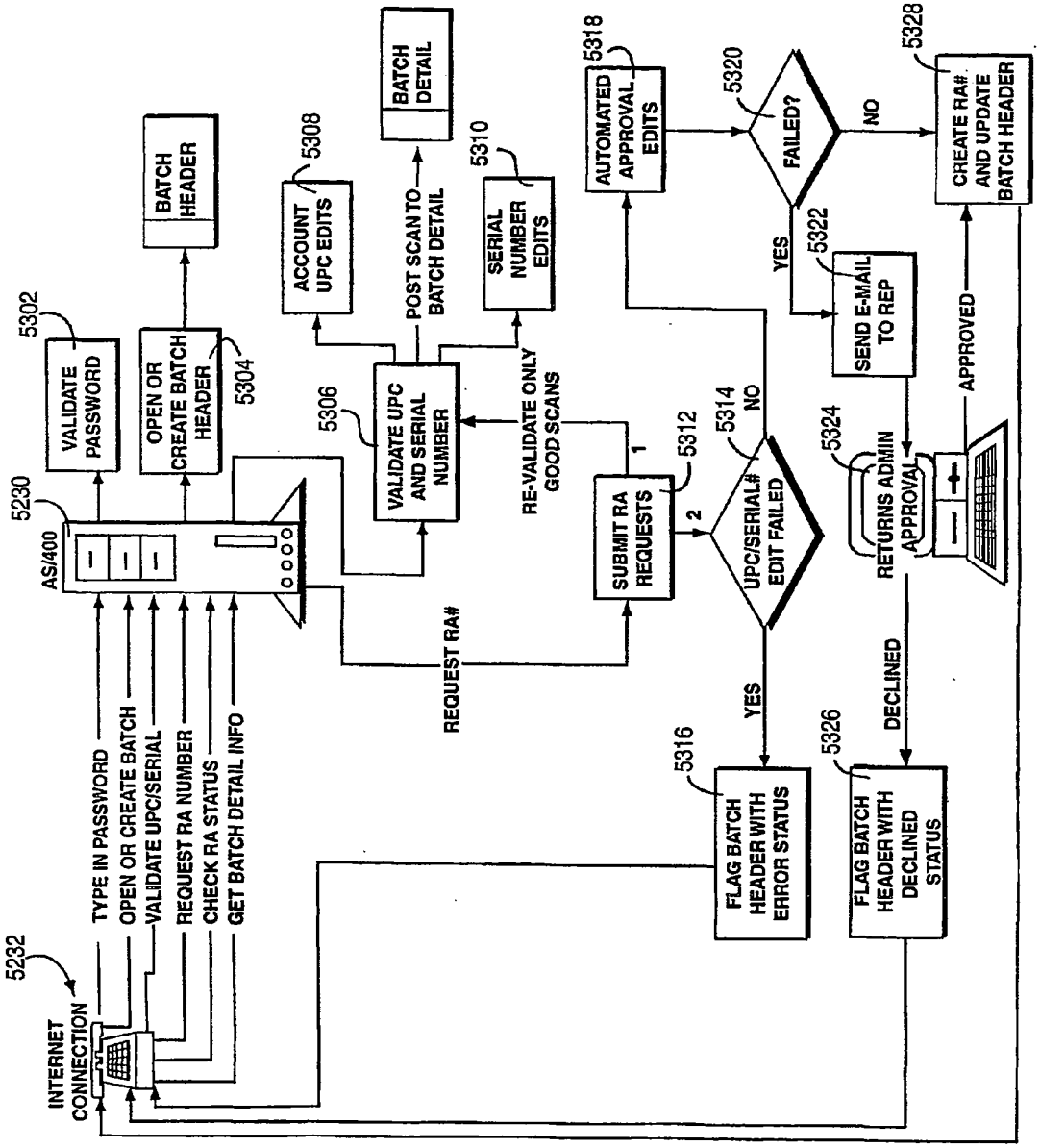

5232
INTERNET CONNECTION
TYPE IN PASSWORD
OPEN OR CREATE BATCH
VALIDATE UPC/SERIAL
REQUEST RA NUMBER
CHECK RA STATUS
GET BATCH DETAIL INFO
5230
AS/400
5302
VALIDATE PASSWORD
OPEN OR CREATE BATCH HEADER
5304
BATCH HEADER
5306
VALIDATE UPC AND SERIAL NUMBER
5308
ACCOUNT UPC EDITS
POST SCAN TO BATCH DETAIL
BATCH DETAIL
5310
SERIAL NUMBER EDITS
RE-VALIDATE ONLY GOOD SCANS
REQUEST RA#
5312
SUBMIT RA REQUESTS
1
2
5314
NO
UPC/SERIAL# EDIT FAILED
YES
5316
FLAG BATCH HEADER WITH ERROR STATUS
5318
AUTOMATED APPROVAL EDITS
5320
FAILED?
NO
YES
5322
SEND E-MAIL TO REP
5324
RETURNS ADMIN APPROVAL
DECLINED
5326
FLAG BATCH HEADER WITH DECLINED STATUS
APPROVED
5328
CREATE RA# AND UPDATE BATCH HEADER

Fig. 9

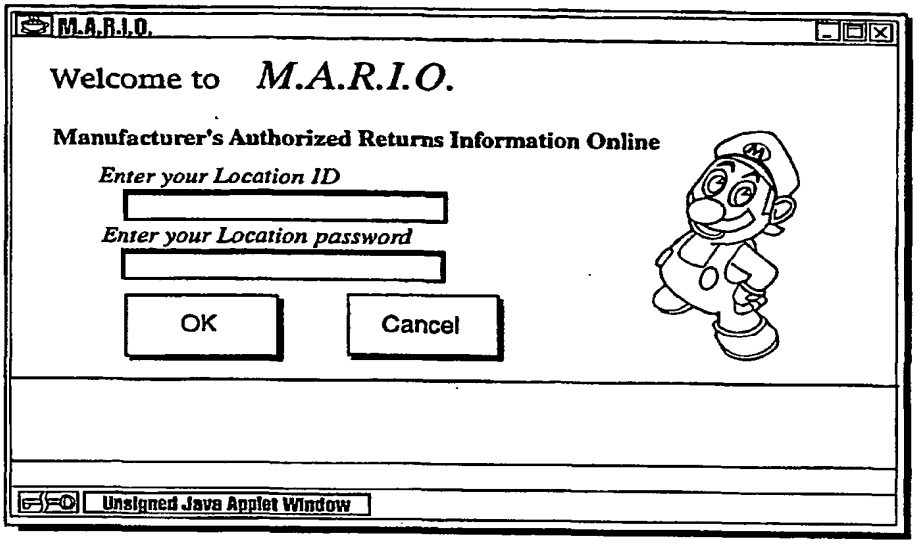


Fig. 10A

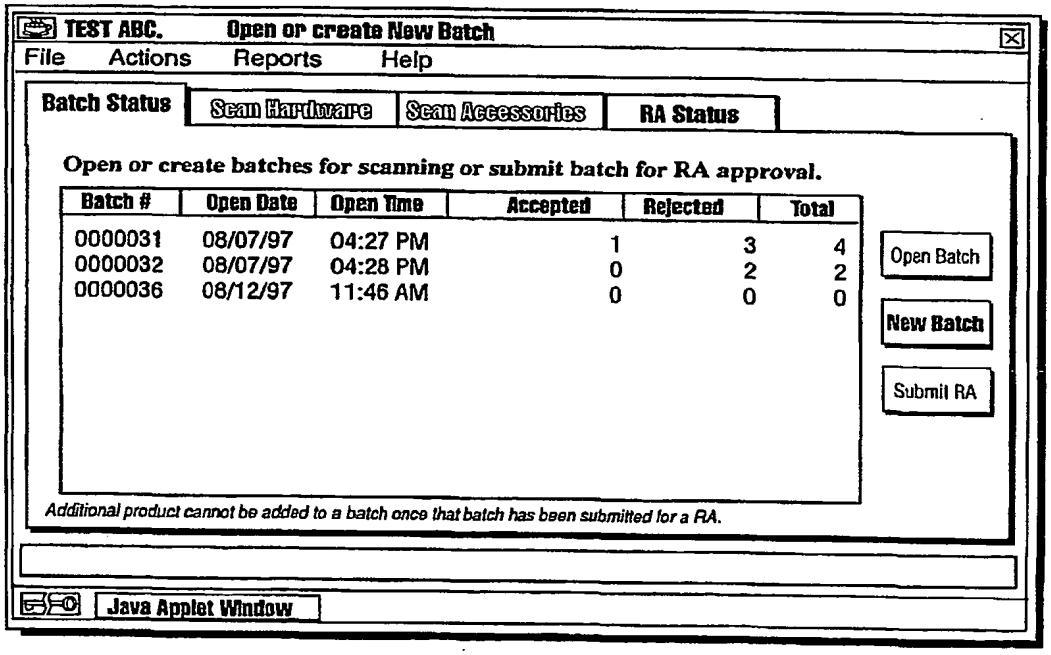


Fig. 10B

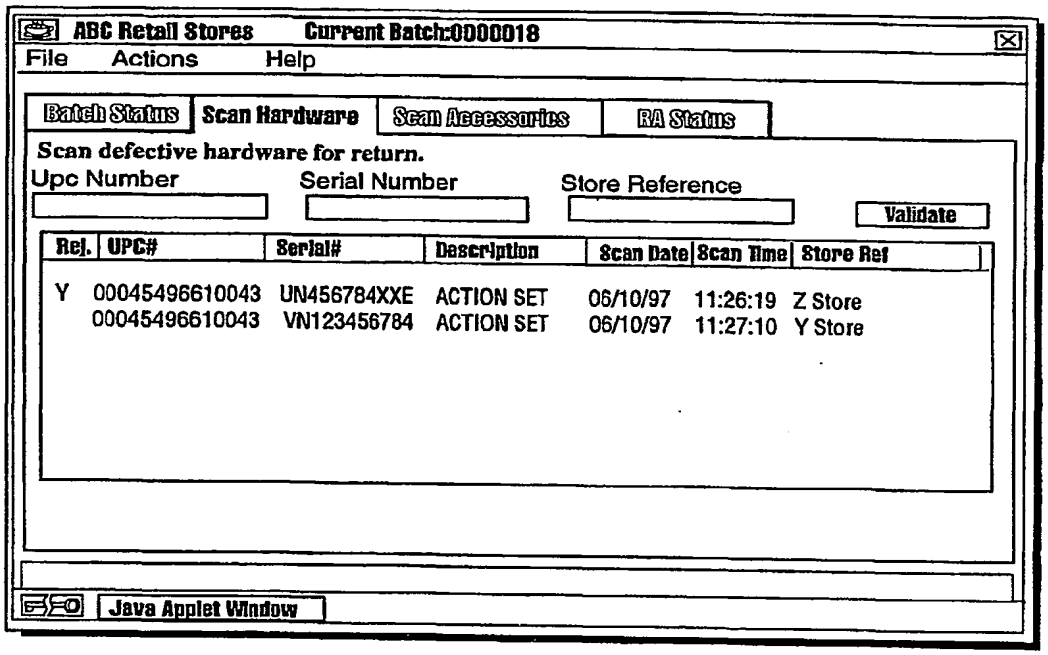


Fig. 10C

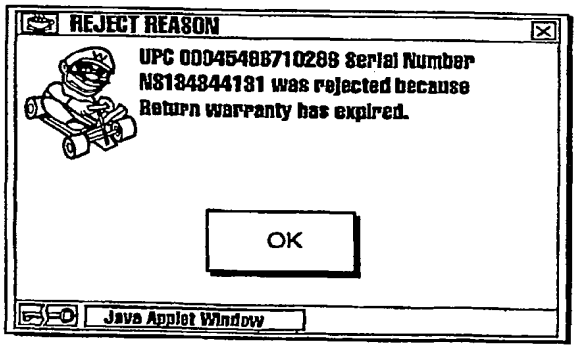


Fig. 10D

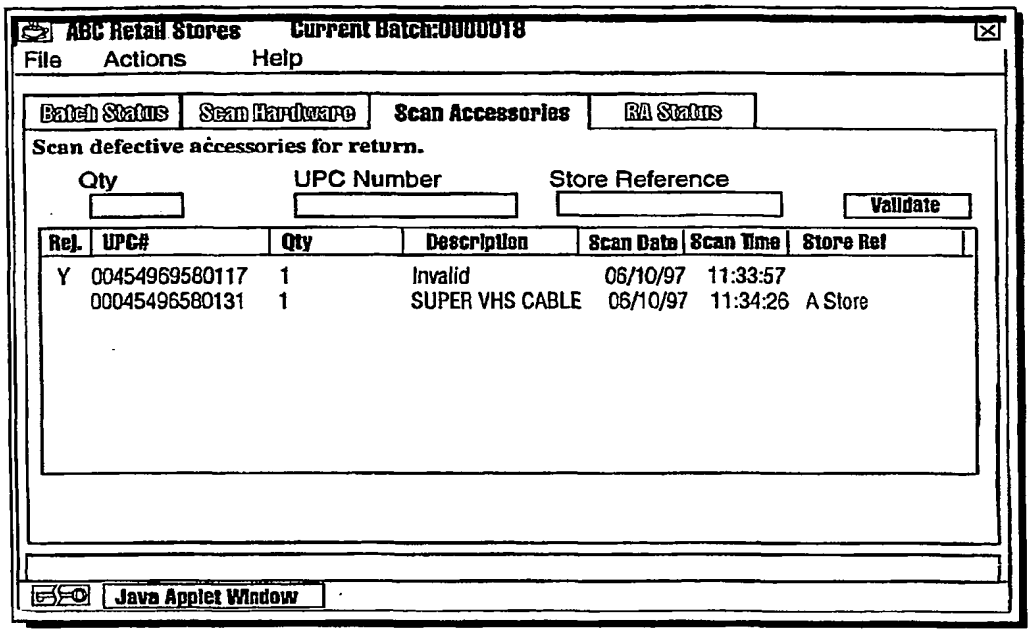


Fig. 10E

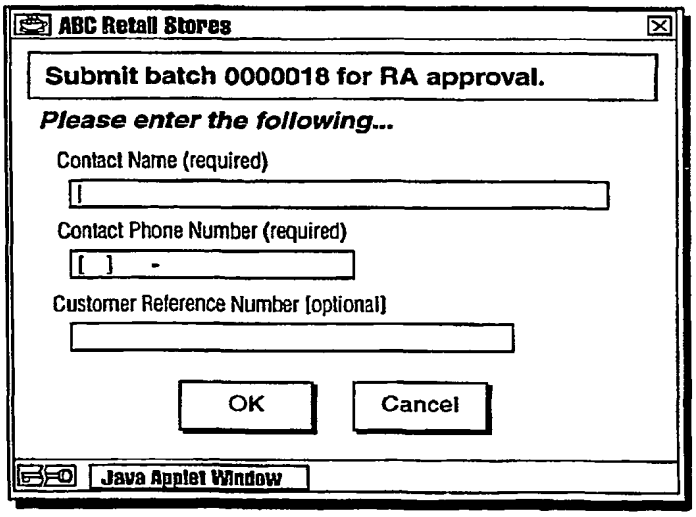


Fig. 10F

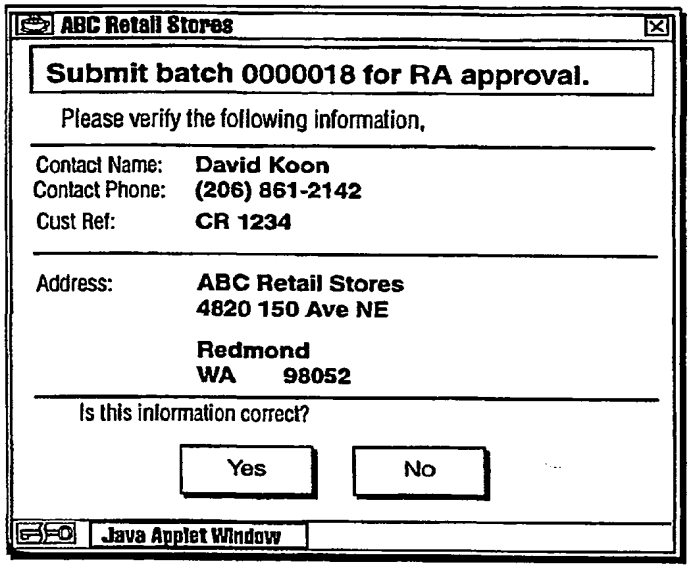


Fig. 10G

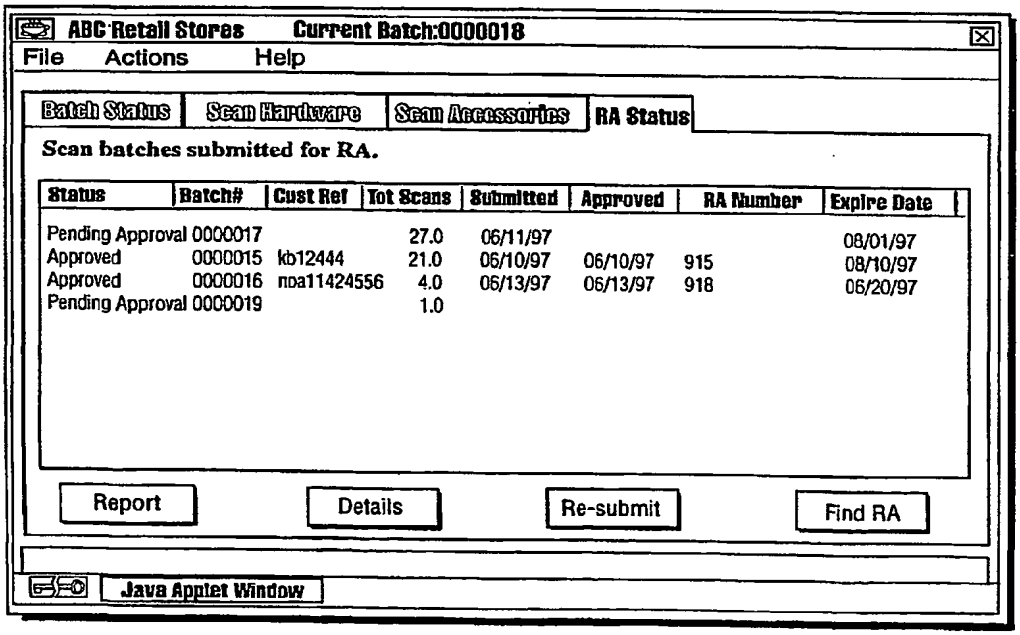


Fig. 10H

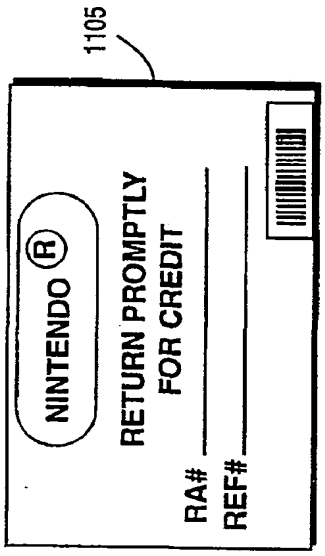


Fig. 11A

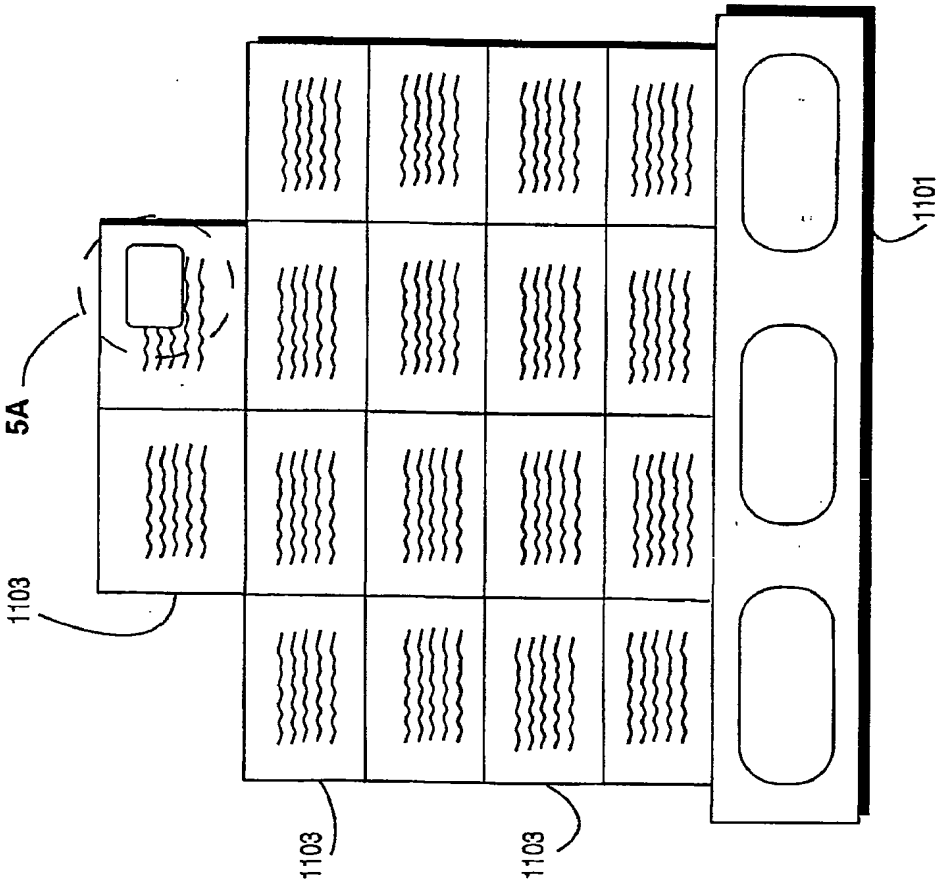


Fig. 11

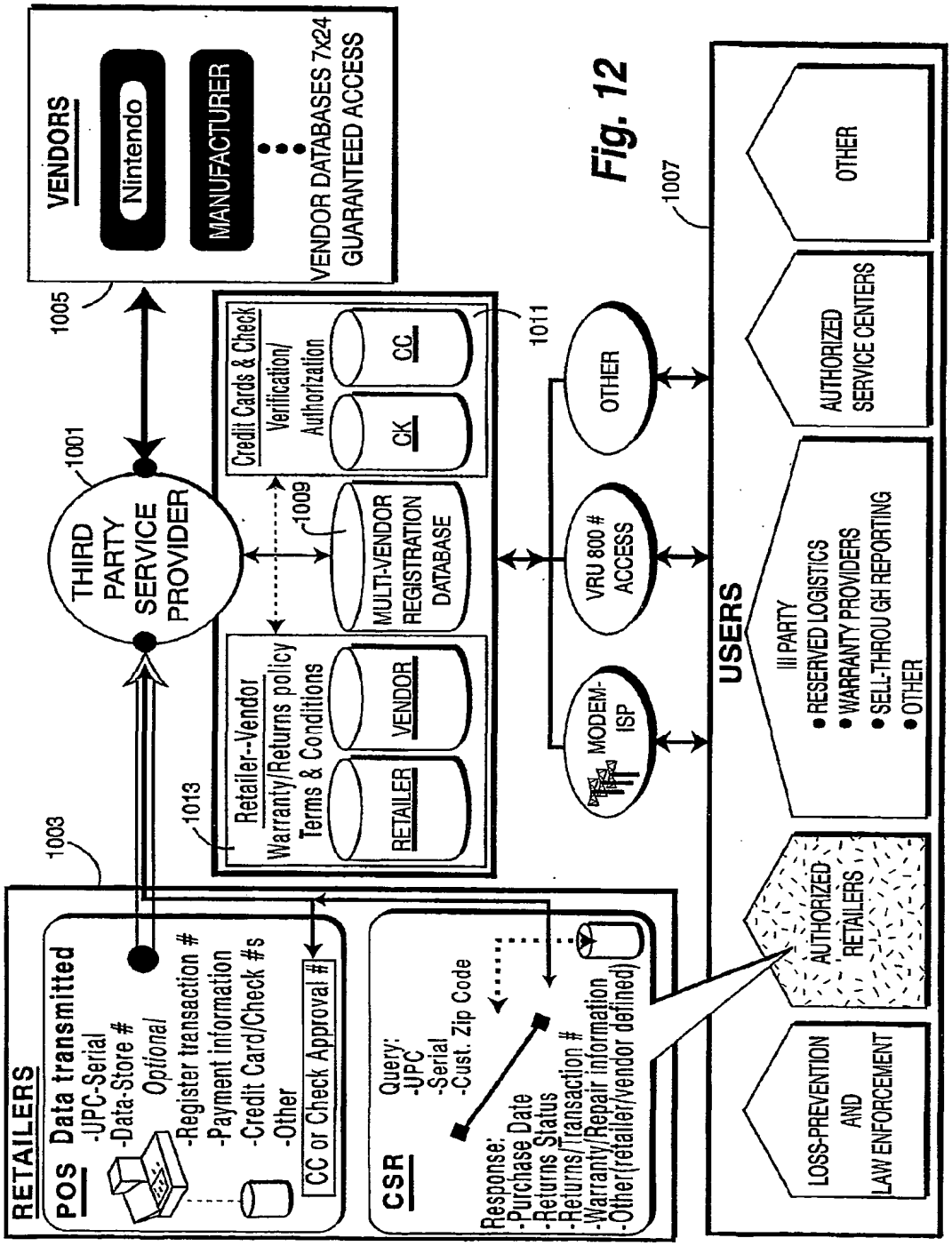

VENDORS
Nintendo
MANUFACTURER
VENDOR DATABASES 7x24
GUARANTEED ACCESS
1005
1001
THIRD PARTY SERVICE PROVIDER
1009
MULTI-VENDOR REGISTRATION DATABASE
Credit Cards & Check Verification/ Authorization
CK
CC
1011
Retailer--Vendor Warranty/Returns policy Terms & Conditions
RETAILER
VENDOR
1013
1003
RETAILERS
POS Data transmitted
-UPC-Serial
-Data-Store #
Optional
-Register transaction #
-Payment information
-Credit Card/Check #s
-Other
CC or Check Approval #
CSR
Query:
-UPC
-Serial
-Cust. Zip Code
Response:
-Purchase Date
-Returns Status
-Returns/Transaction #
-Warranty/Repair information
-Other(retailer/vendor defined)
MODEM-ISP
VRU 800 # ACCESS
OTHER
1007
USERS
III PARTY
• RESERVED LOGISTICS
• WARRANTY PROVIDERS
• SELL-THROUGH REPORTING
• OTHER
AUTHORIZED SERVICE CENTERS
OTHER
AUTHORIZED RETAILERS
LOSS-PREVENTION AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

Fig. 12

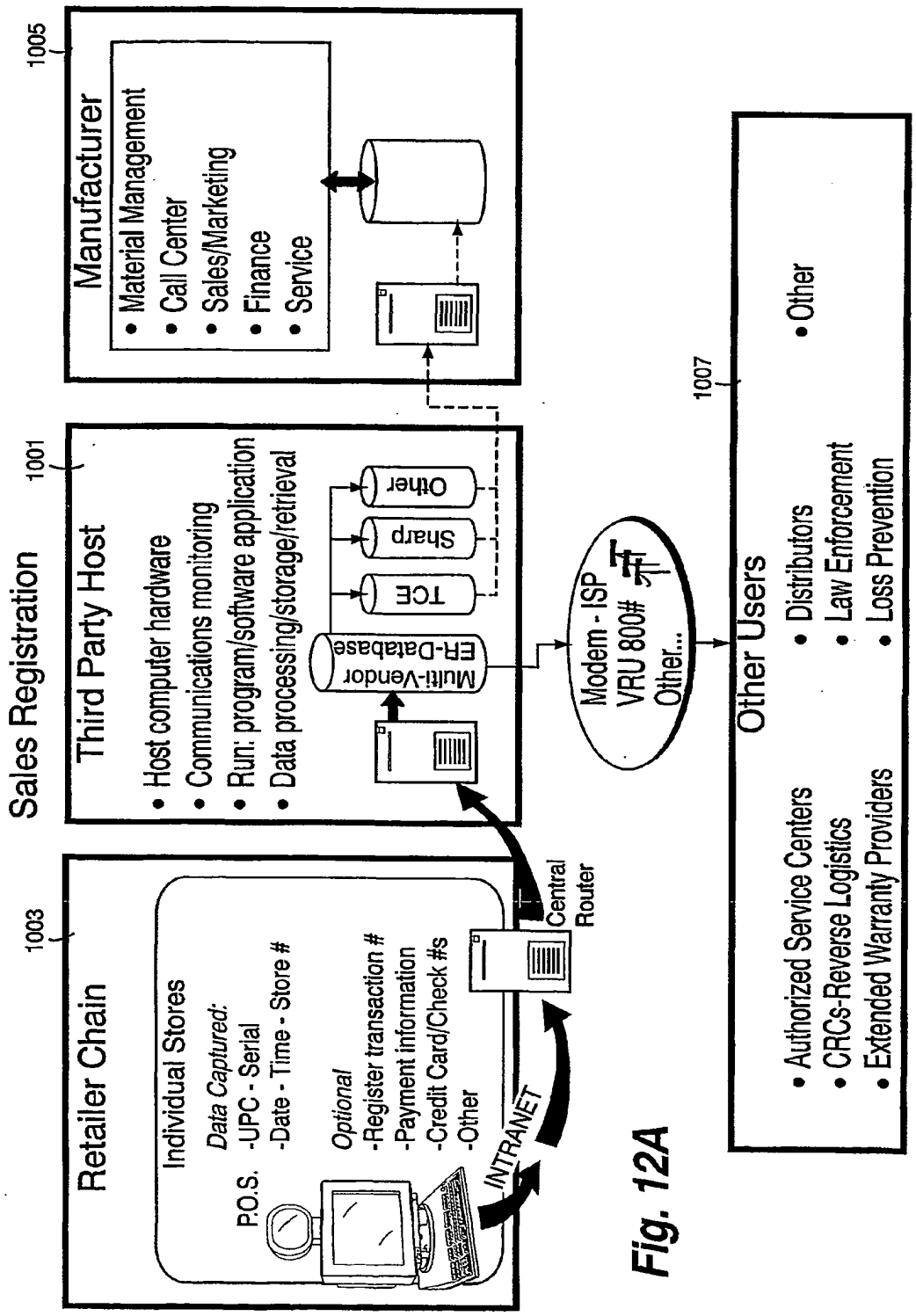

Sales Registration
1003
Retailer Chain
Individual Stores
Data Captured:
P.O.S. -UPC - Serial
-Date - Time - Store #
Optional
-Register transaction #
-Payment information
-Credit Card/Check #s
-Other
INTRANET
Central Router
1001
Third Party Host
• Host computer hardware
• Communications monitoring
• Run: program/software application
• Data processing/storage/retrieval
Multi-Vendor ER-Database
TCE
Sharp
Other
Modem - ISP
VRU 800#
Other...
1005
Manufacturer
• Material Management
• Call Center
• Sales/Marketing
• Finance
• Service
1007
Other Users
• Authorized Service Centers
• CRCs-Reverse Logistics
• Extended Warranty Providers
• Distributors
• Law Enforcement
• Loss Prevention
• Other

Fig. 12A

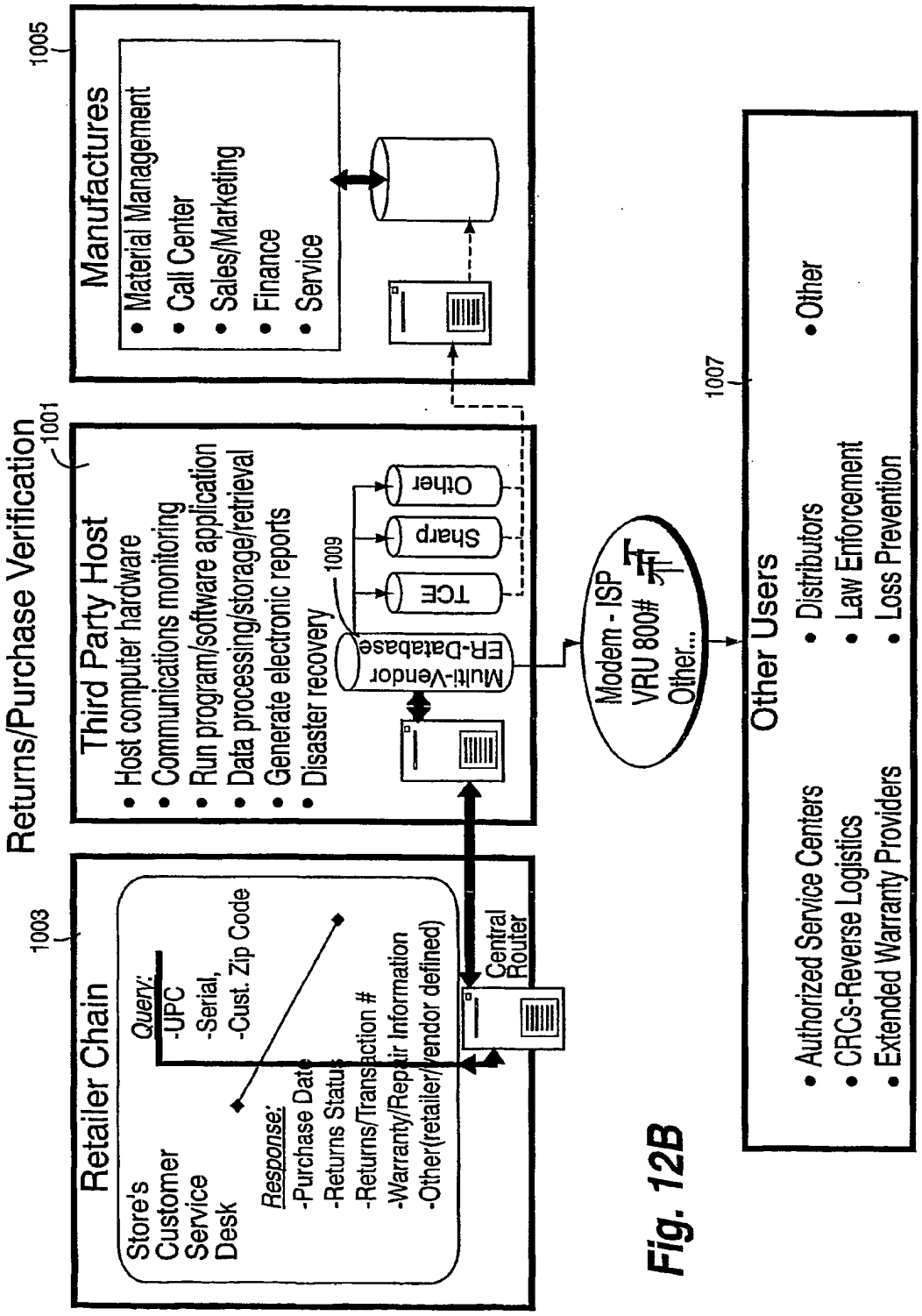

Returns/Purchase Verification
1001
1003
1005
1007
1009
Retailer Chain
Store's Customer Service Desk
Query:
-UPC
-Serial,
-Cust. Zip Code
Response:
-Purchase Date
-Returns Status
-Returns/Transaction #
-Warranty/Repair Information
-Other(retailer/vendor defined)
Central Router
Third Party Host
• Host computer hardware
• Communications monitoring
• Run program/software application
• Data processing/storage/retrieval
• Generate electronic reports
• Disaster recovery
Multi-Vendor ER-Database
TCE
Sharp
Other
Modem - ISP
VRU 800#
Other...
Manufactures
• Material Management
• Call Center
• Sales/Marketing
• Finance
• Service
Other Users
• Authorized Service Centers
• CRCs-Reverse Logistics
• Extended Warranty Providers
• Distributors
• Law Enforcement
• Loss Prevention
• Other

Fig. 12B

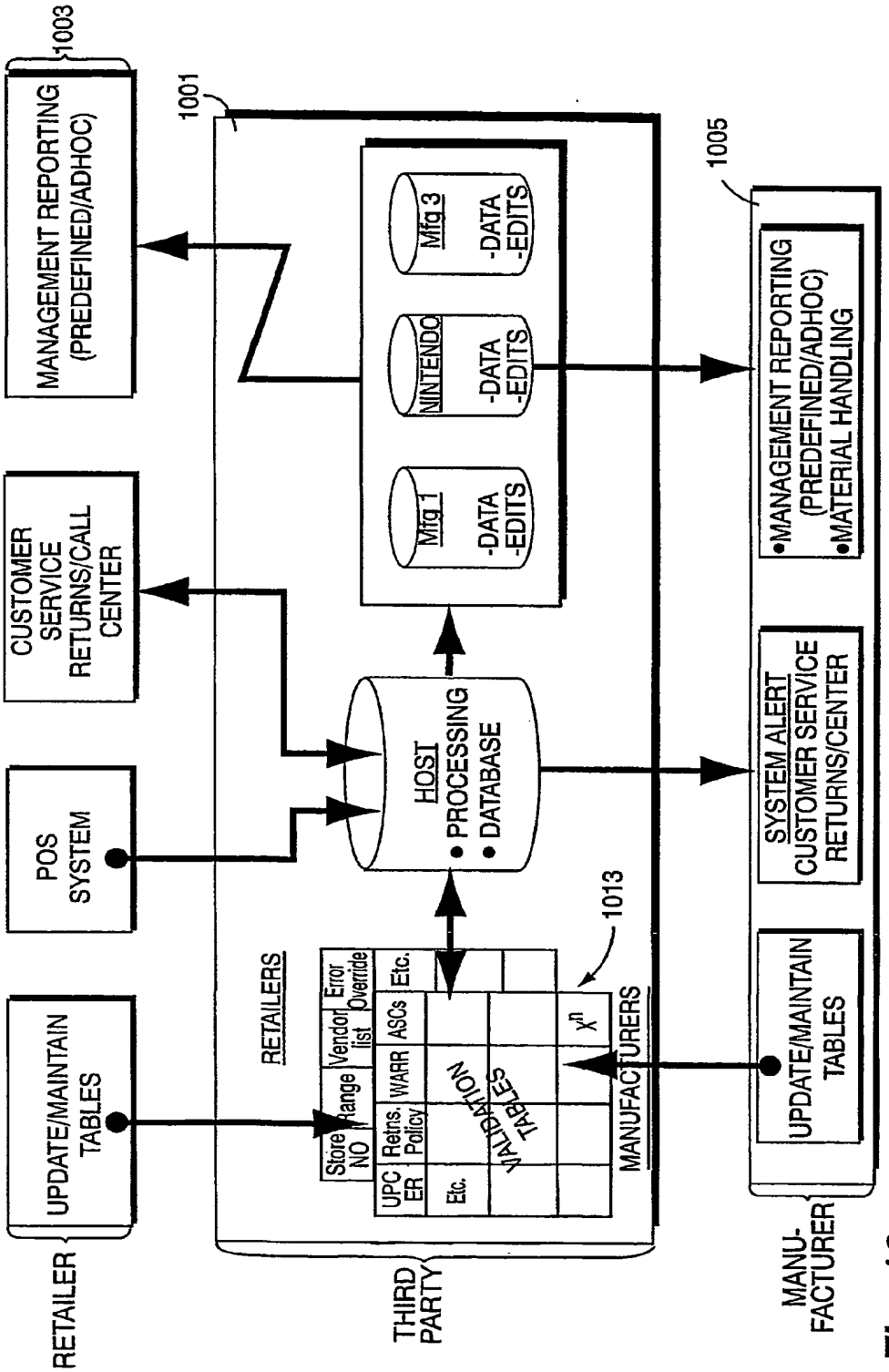

1003
MANAGEMENT REPORTING (PREDEFINED/ADHOC)
1001
1005
CUSTOMER SERVICE RETURNS/CALL CENTER
POS SYSTEM
HOST • PROCESSING • DATABASE
Mfg 1 -DATA -EDITS
NINTENDO -DATA -EDITS
Mfg 3 -DATA -EDITS
•MANAGEMENT REPORTING (PREDEFINED/ADHOC) •MATERIAL HANDLING
SYSTEM ALERT CUSTOMER SERVICE RETURNS/CENTER
UPDATE/MAINTAIN TABLES
RETAILERS
1013
Store NO
Retns. Policy
UPC ER
Etc.
Range
WARR
Vendor list
ASCs
Error Override
Etc.
VALIDATION TABLES
X^n
MANUFACTURERS
UPDATE/MAINTAIN TABLES
RETAILER
THIRD PARTY
MANU-FACTURER

Fig. 13

Fig. 14

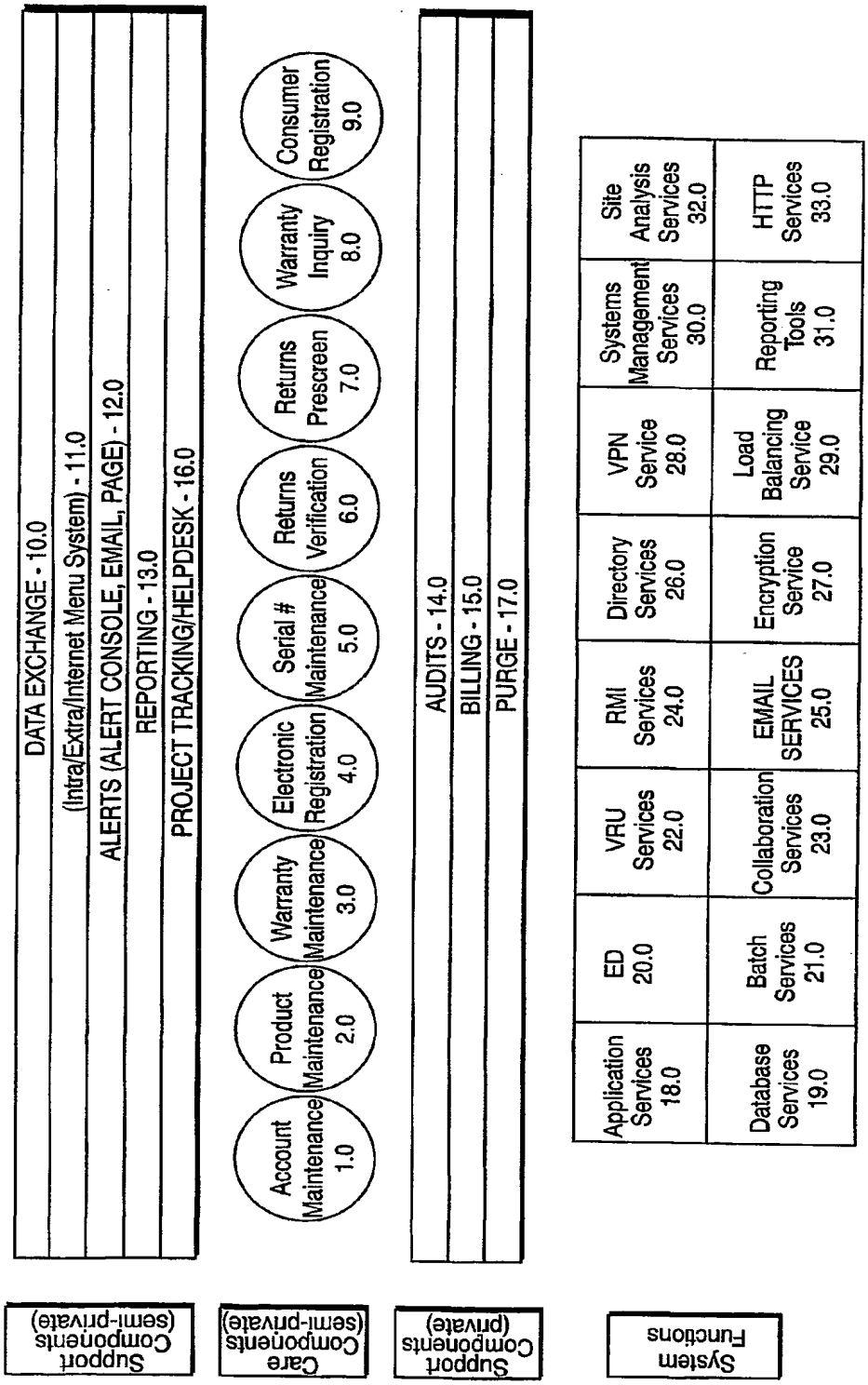
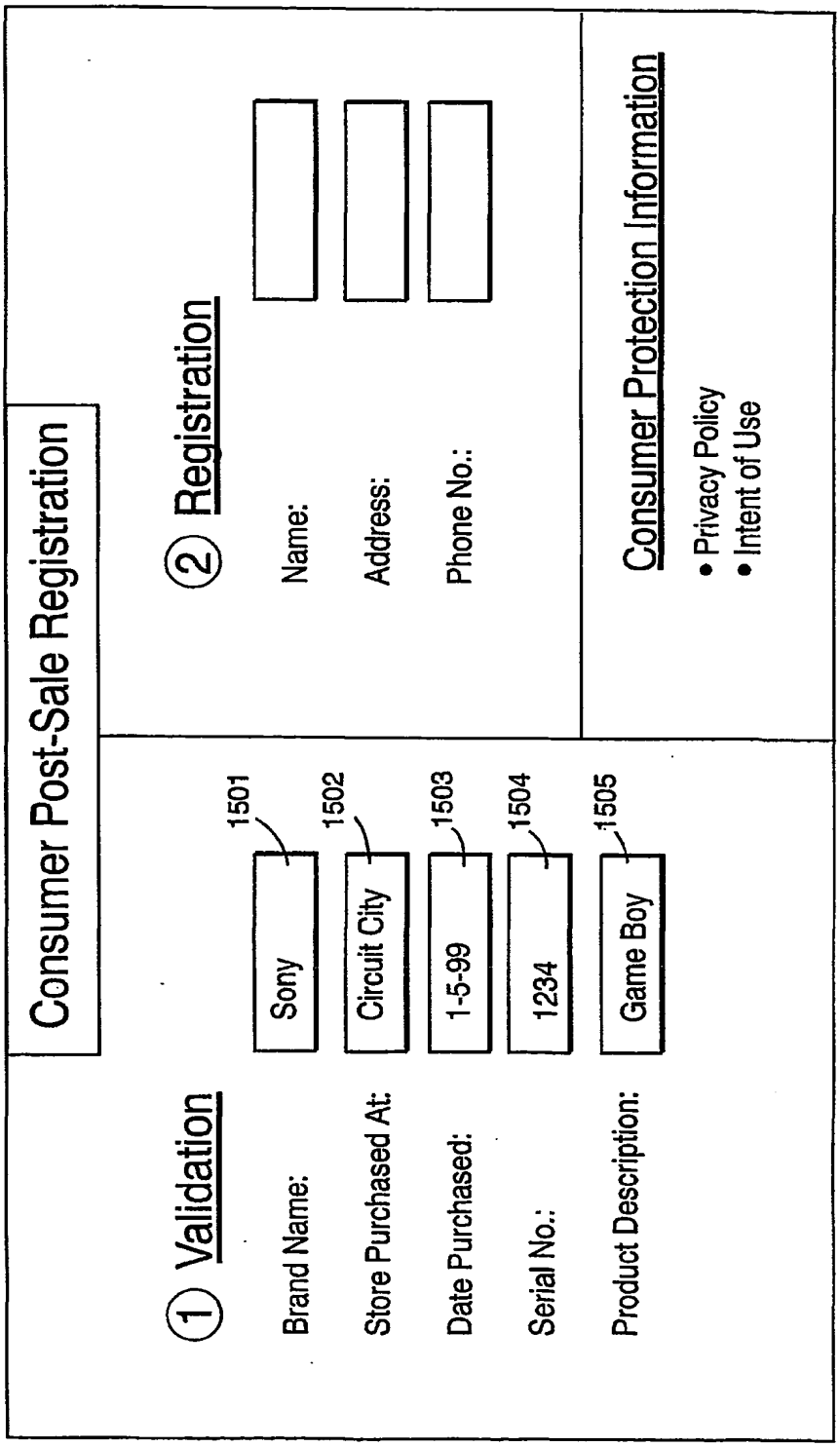

Application Overview
Support Components (semi-private)
DATA EXCHANGE - 10.0
(Intra/Extra/Internet Menu System) - 11.0
ALERTS (ALERT CONSOLE, EMAIL, PAGE) - 12.0
REPORTING - 13.0
PROJECT TRACKING/HELPDESK - 16.0
Care Components (semi-private)
Account Maintenance 1.0
Product Maintenance 2.0
Warranty Maintenance 3.0
Electronic Registration 4.0
Serial # Maintenance 5.0
Returns Verification 6.0
Returns Prescreen 7.0
Warranty Inquiry 8.0
Consumer Registration 9.0
Support Components (private)
AUDITS - 14.0
BILLING - 15.0
PURGE - 17.0
System Functions
Application Services 18.0
ED 20.0
VRU Services 22.0
RMI Services 24.0
Directory Services 26.0
VPN Service 28.0
Systems Management Services 30.0
Site Analysis Services 32.0
Database Services 19.0
Batch Services 21.0
Collaboration Services 23.0
EMAIL SERVICES 25.0
Encryption Service 27.0
Load Balancing Service 29.0
Reporting Tools 31.0
HTTP Services 33.0

Fig. 15


Consumer Post-Sale Registration
① Validation
Brand Name:
Sony
1501
Store Purchased At:
Circuit City
1502
Date Purchased:
1-5-99
1503
Serial No.:
1234
1504
Product Description:
Game Boy
1505
② Registration
Name:
Address:
Phone No.:
Consumer Protection Information
• Privacy Policy
• Intent of Use

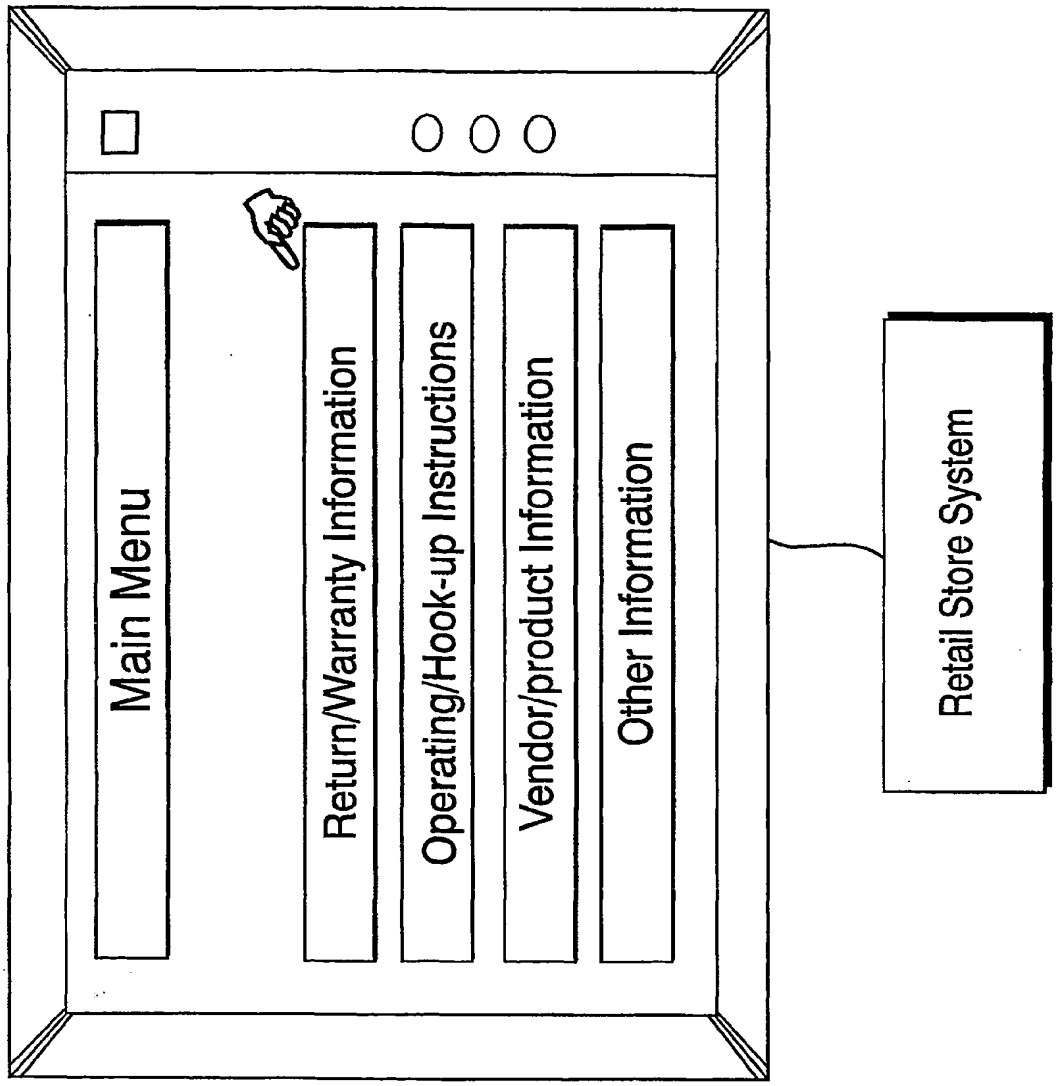

Main Menu
Return/Warranty Information
Operating/Hook-up Instructions
Vendor/product Information
Other Information
Retail Store System

Fig. 16A

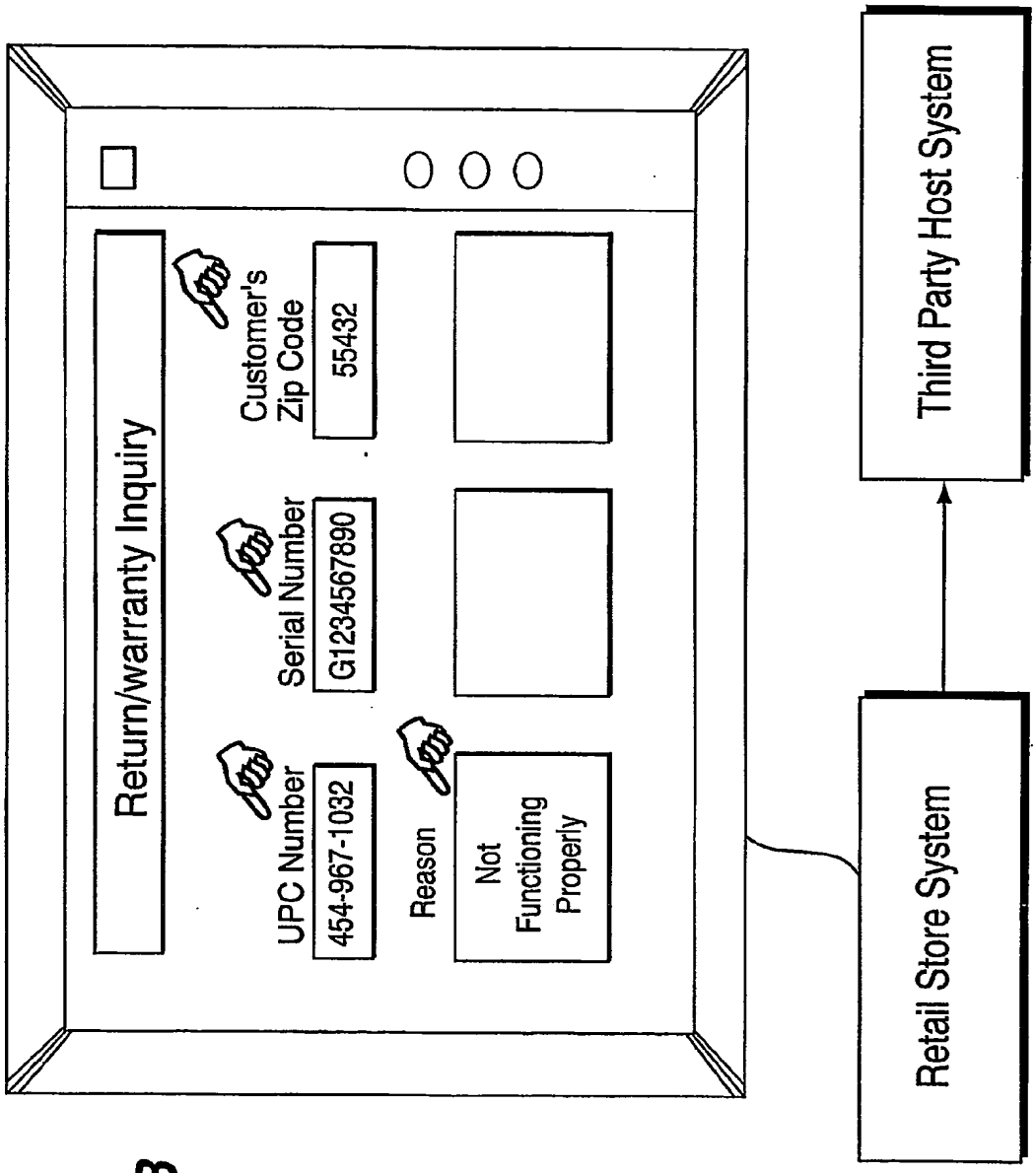

Return/warranty Inquiry
Customer's Zip Code
55432
Serial Number
G1234567890
UPC Number
454-967-1032
Reason
Not Functioning Properly
Retail Store System
Third Party Host System

Fig. 16B

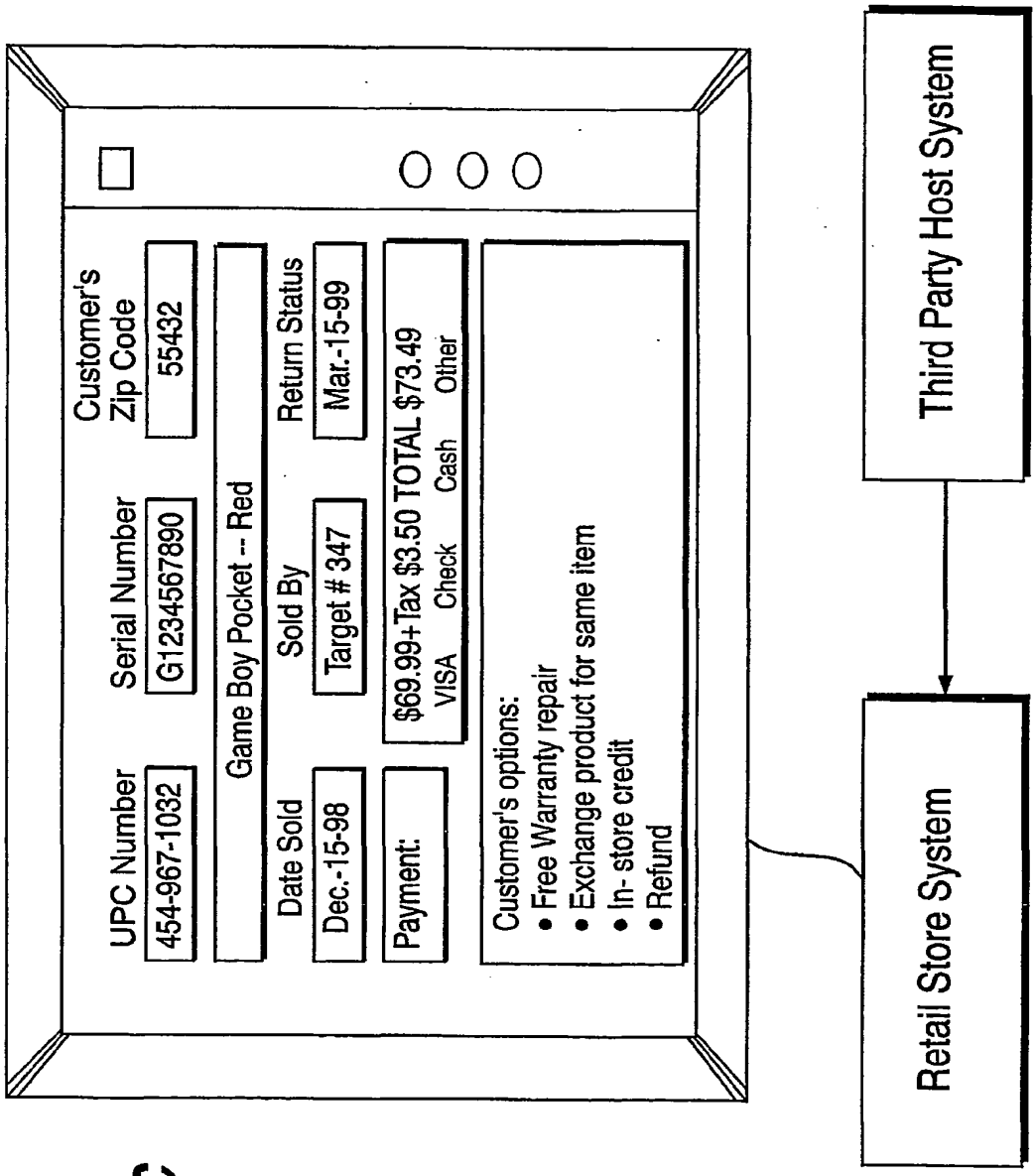

UPC Number
454-967-1032
Serial Number
G1234567890
Customer's Zip Code
55432
Game Boy Pocket -- Red
Date Sold
Dec.-15-98
Sold By
Target # 347
Return Status
Mar.-15-99
Payment:
$69.99+Tax $3.50 TOTAL $73.49
VISA Check Cash Other
Customer's options:
• Free Warranty repair
• Exchange product for same item
• In- store credit
• Refund
Retail Store System
Third Party Host System

Fig. 16C

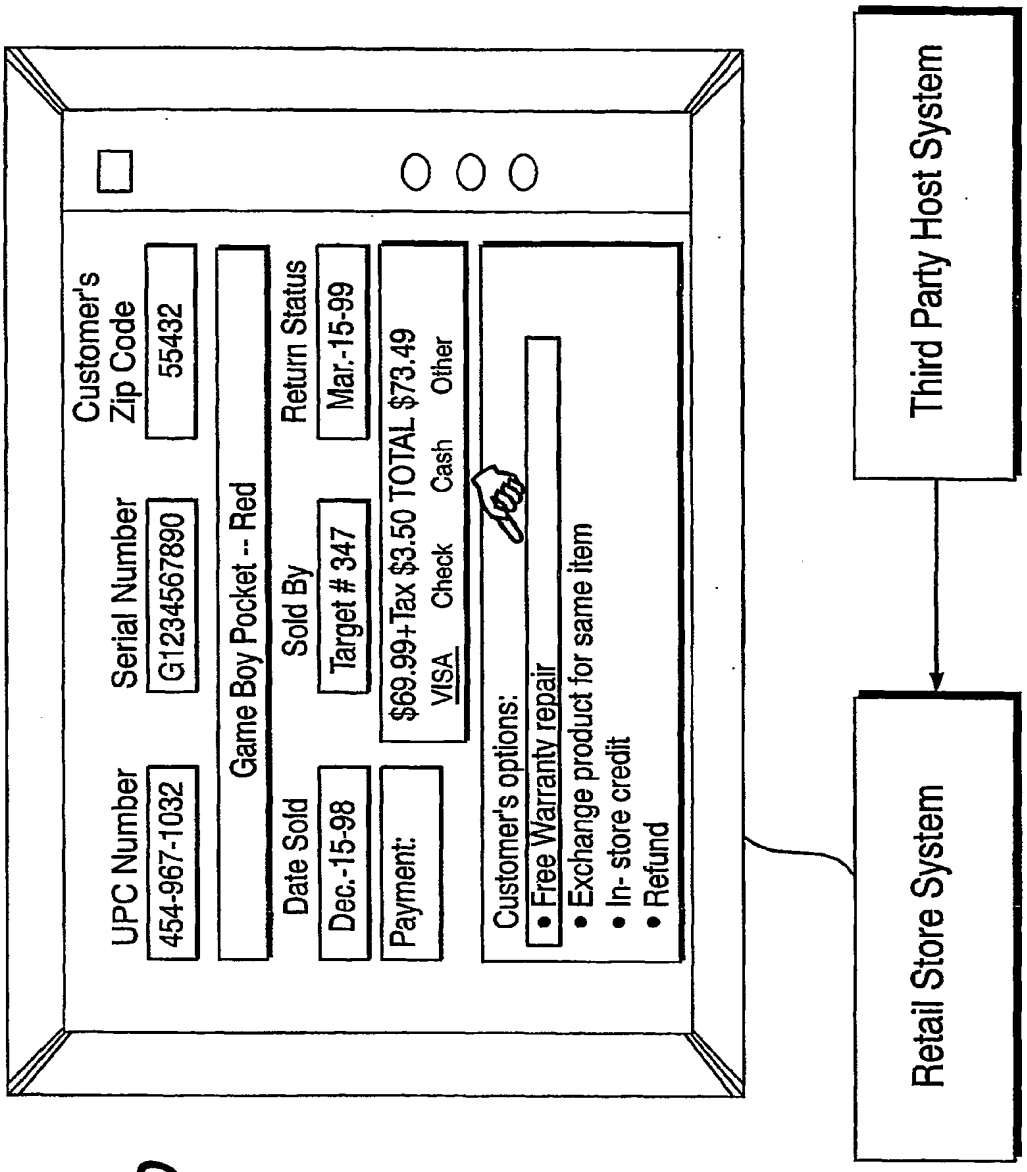

UPC Number
454-967-1032
Serial Number
G1234567890
Customer's Zip Code
55432
Game Boy Pocket -- Red
Date Sold
Dec.-15-98
Sold By
Target # 347
Return Status
Mar.-15-99
Payment:
$69.99+Tax $3.50 TOTAL $73.49
VISA Check Cash Other
Customer's options:
• Free Warranty repair
• Exchange product for same item
• In- store credit
• Refund
Retail Store System
Third Party Host System

Fig. 16D

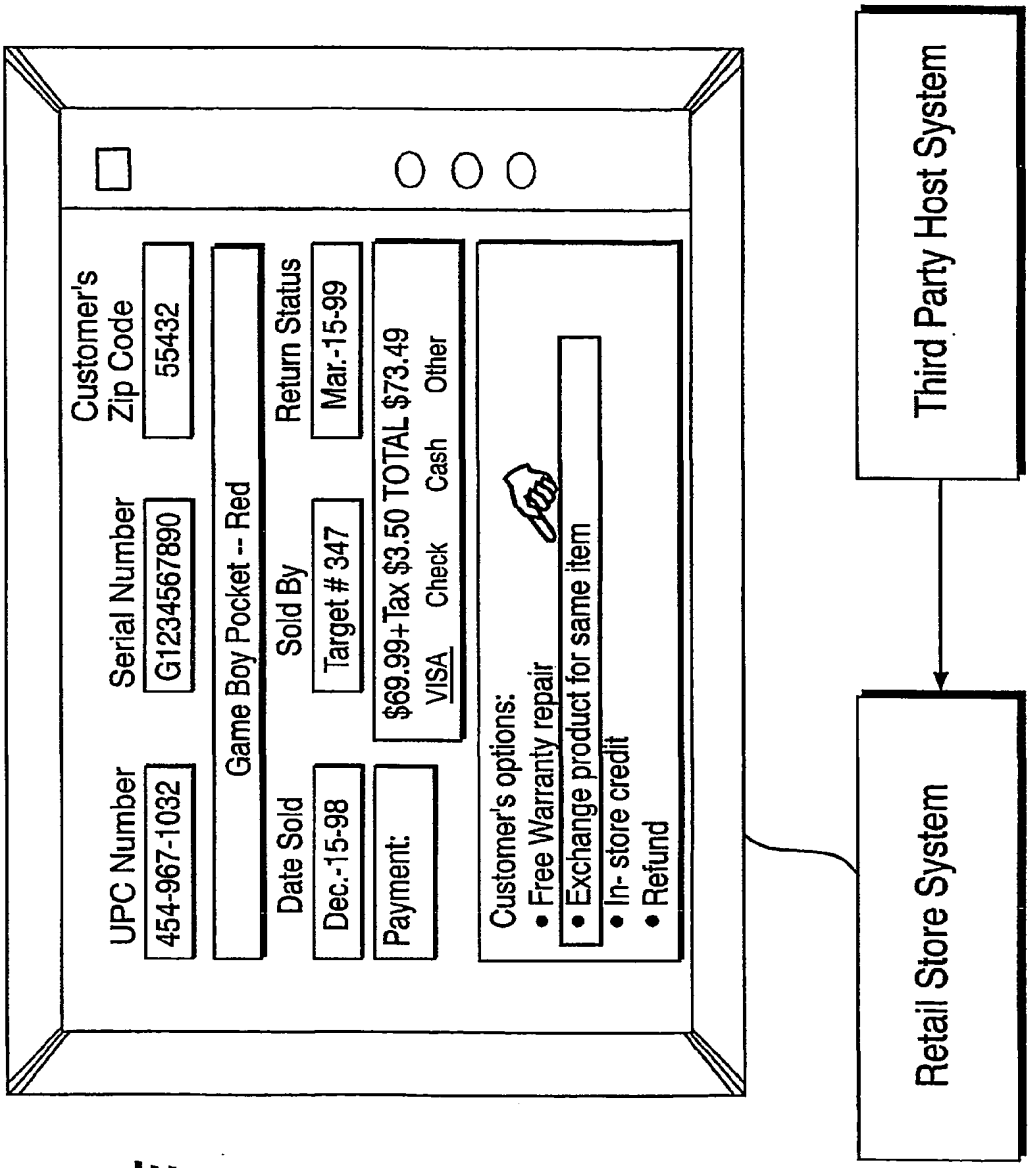

UPC Number
454-967-1032
Serial Number
G1234567890
Customer's Zip Code
55432
Game Boy Pocket -- Red
Date Sold
Dec.-15-98
Sold By
Target # 347
Return Status
Mar.-15-99
Payment:
$69.99+Tax $3.50 TOTAL $73.49
VISA Check Cash Other
Customer's options:
• Free Warranty repair
• Exchange product for same item
• In- store credit
• Refund
Retail Store System
Third Party Host System

Fig. 16E

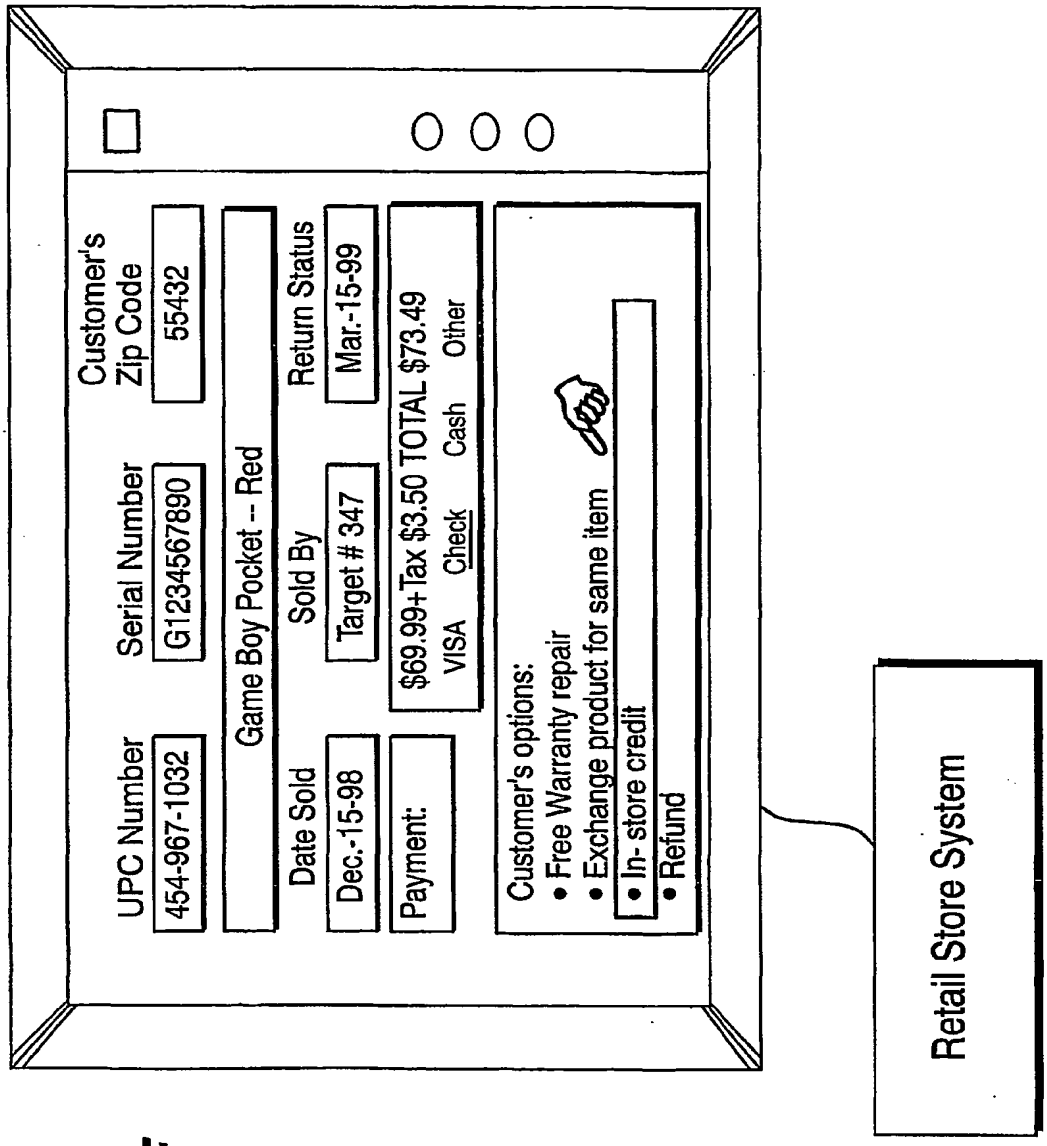

UPC Number
454-967-1032
Serial Number
G1234567890
Customer's Zip Code
55432
Game Boy Pocket -- Red
Date Sold
Dec.-15-98
Sold By
Target # 347
Return Status
Mar.-15-99
Payment:
$69.99+Tax $3.50 TOTAL $73.49
VISA Check Cash Other
Customer's options:
• Free Warranty repair
• Exchange product for same item
• In- store credit
• Refund
Retail Store System

Fig. 16F

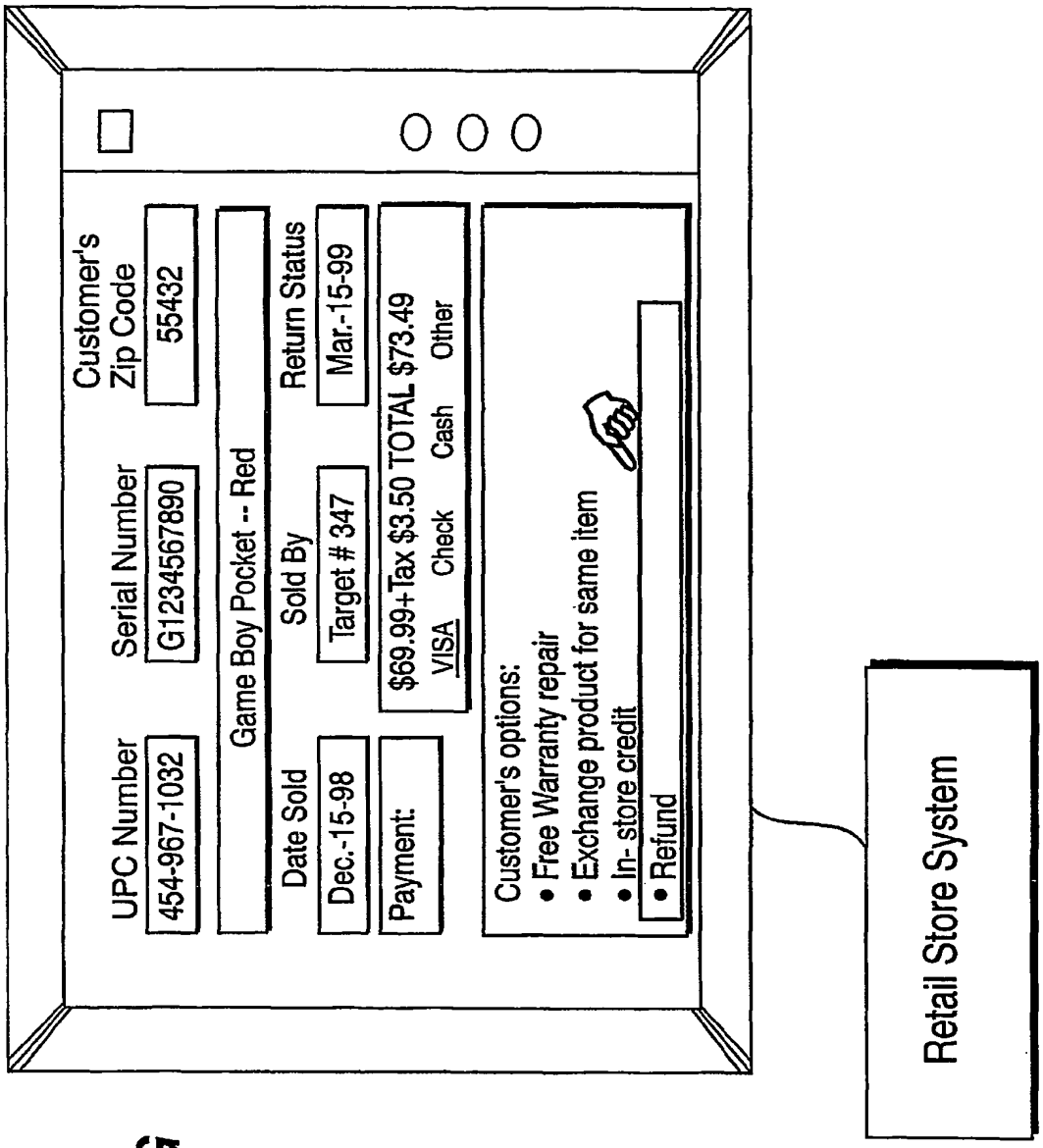

UPC Number
454-967-1032
Serial Number
G1234567890
Customer's Zip Code
55432
Game Boy Pocket -- Red
Date Sold
Dec.-15-98
Sold By
Target # 347
Return Status
Mar.-15-99
Payment:
$69.99+Tax $3.50 TOTAL $73.49
VISA Check Cash Other
Customer's options:
• Free Warranty repair
• Exchange product for same item
• In- store credit
• Refund
Retail Store System

Fig. 16G

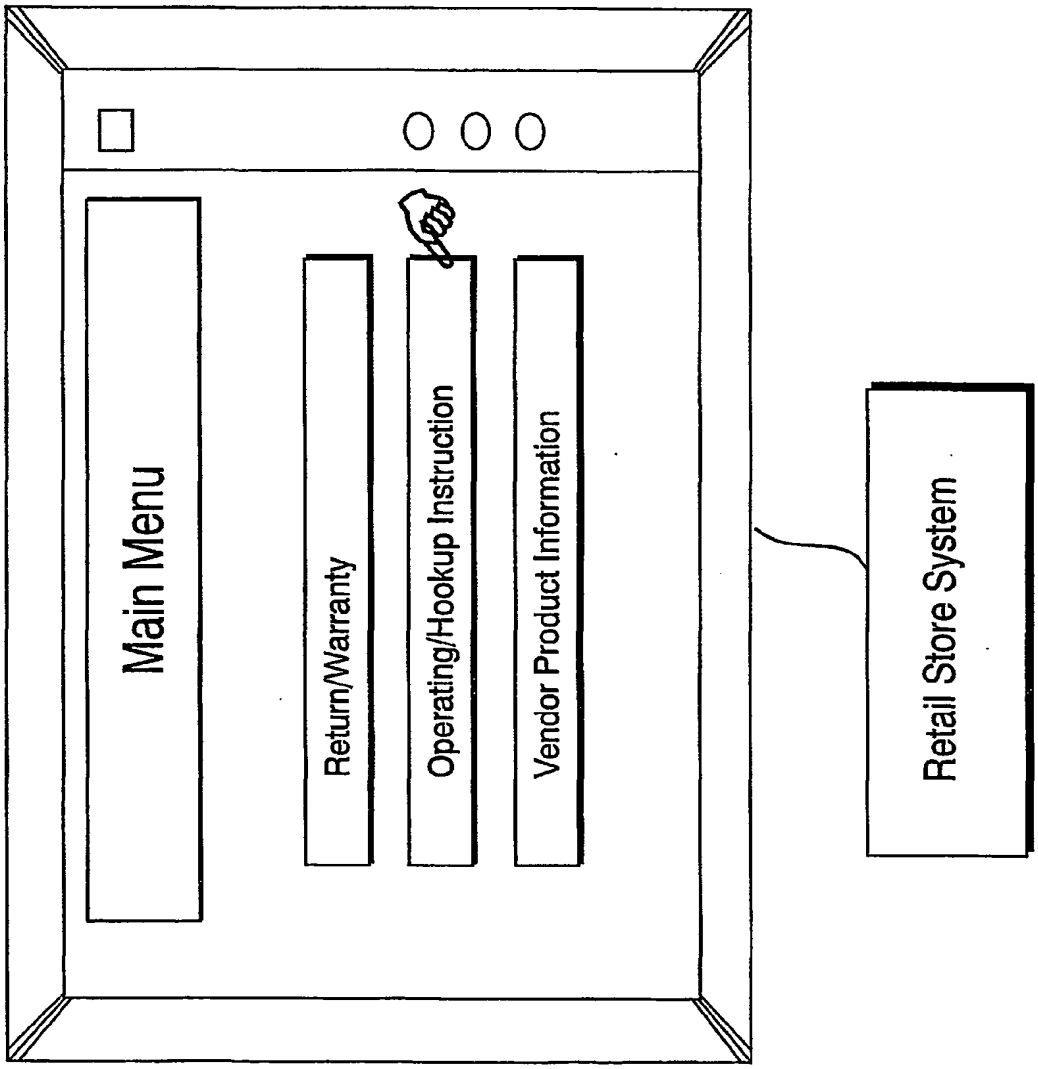

Main Menu
Return/Warranty
Operating/Hookup Instruction
Vendor Product Information
Retail Store System

Fig. 17A

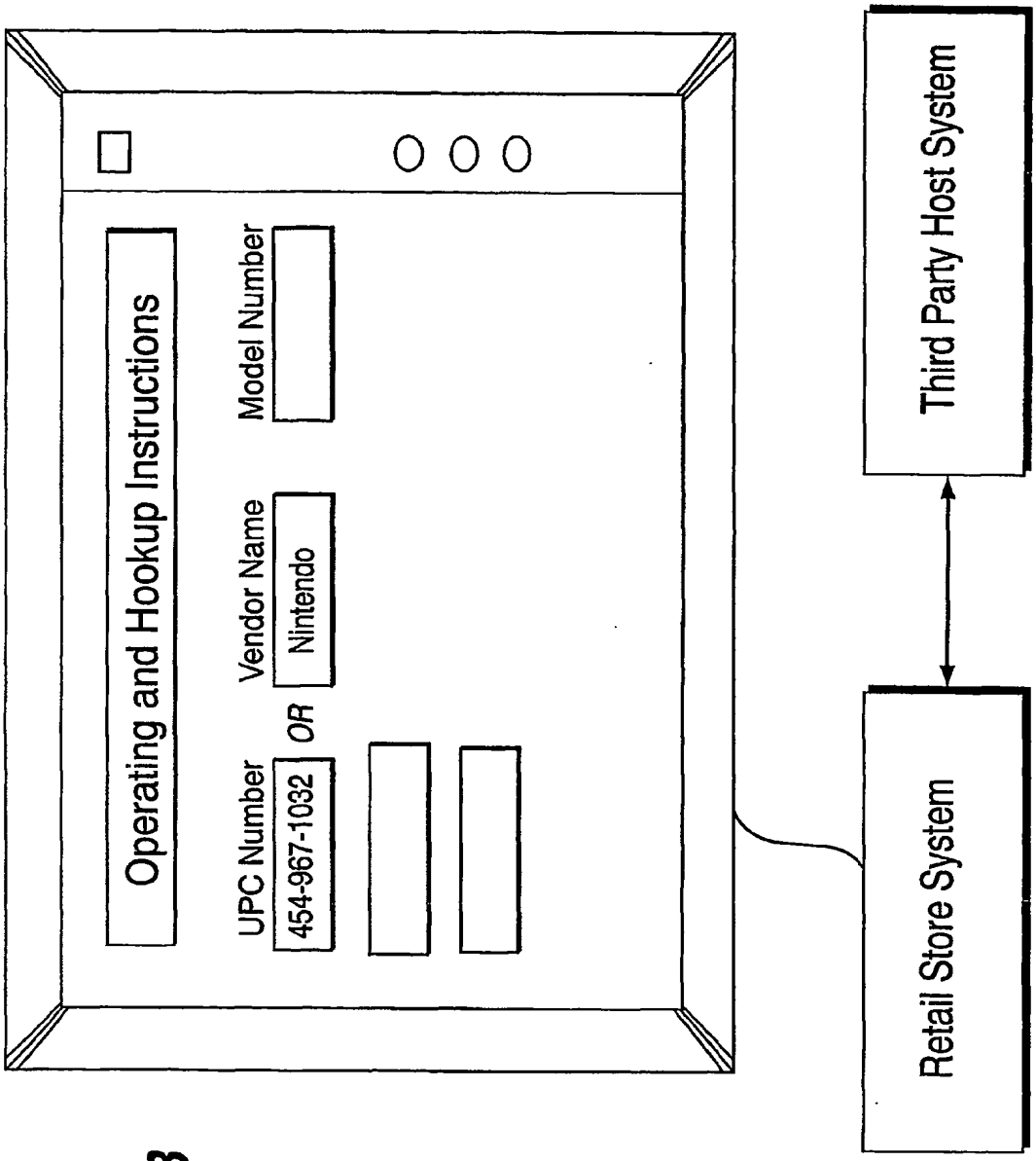

Operating and Hookup Instructions
Model Number
Vendor Name
Nintendo
OR
UPC Number
454-967-1032
Third Party Host System
Retail Store System

Fig. 17B

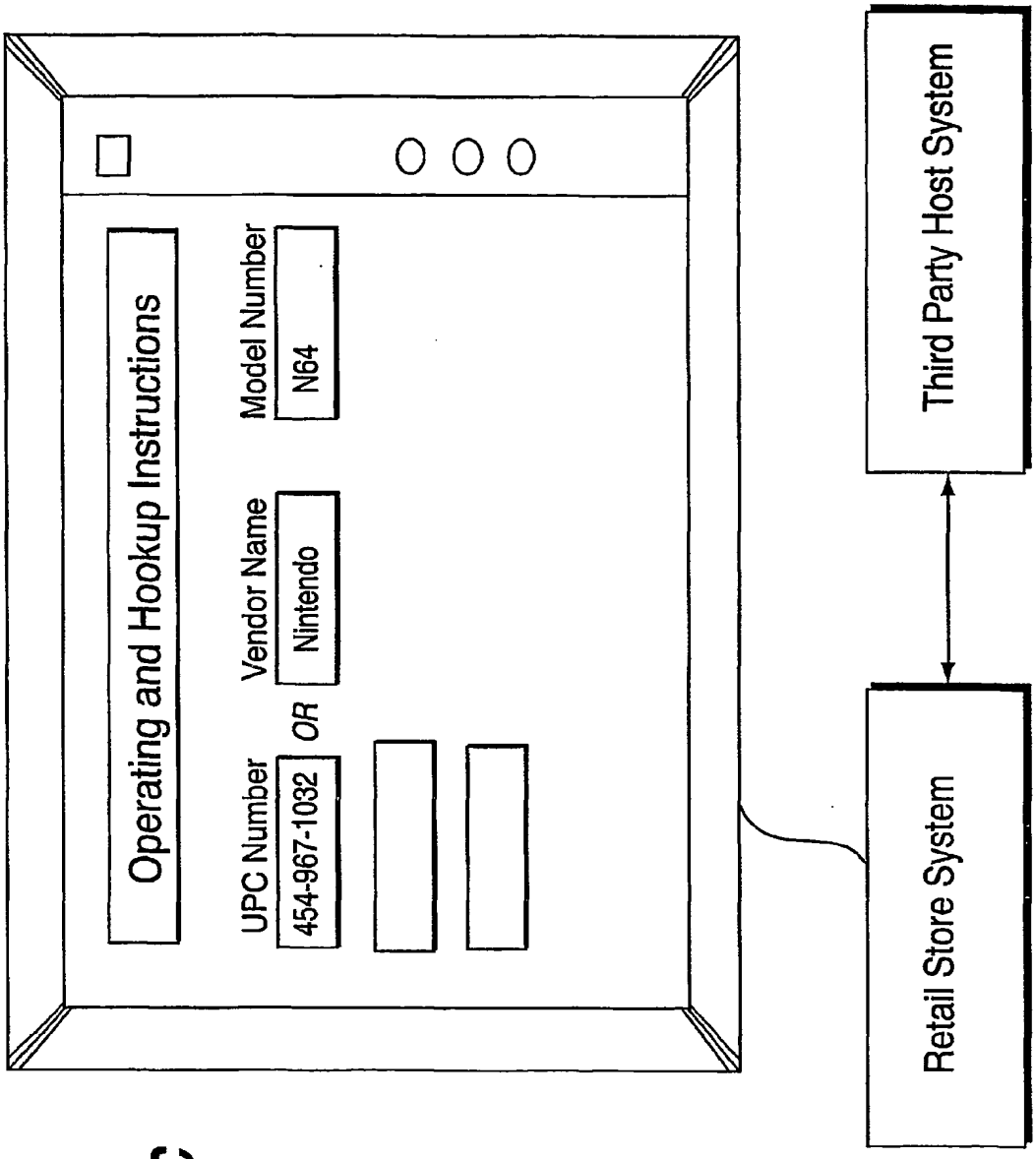

Operating and Hookup Instructions
Model Number
N64
Vendor Name
Nintendo
OR
UPC Number
454-967-1032
Third Party Host System
Retail Store System

Fig. 17C

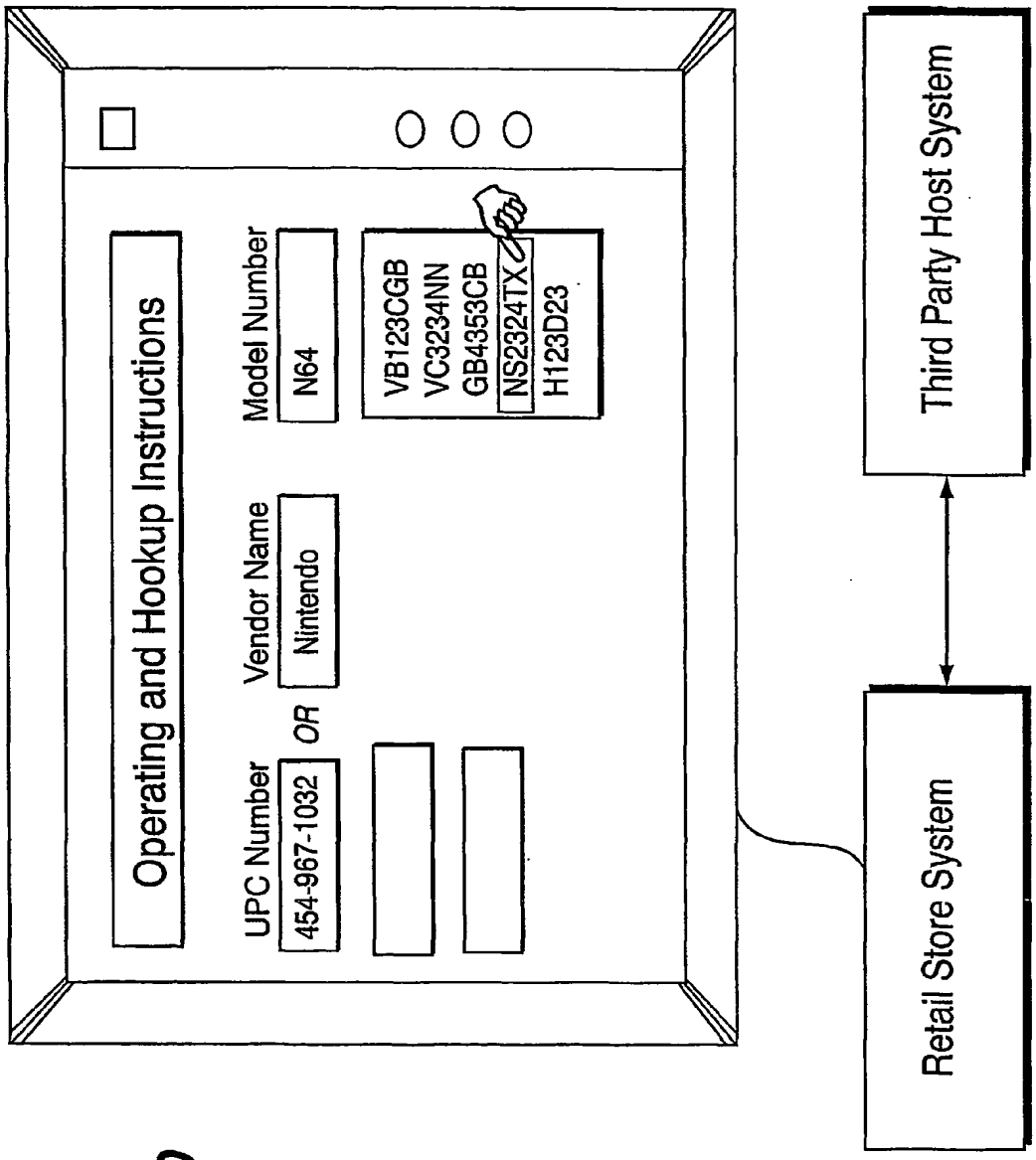

Operating and Hookup Instructions
UPC Number
454-967-1032
OR
Vendor Name
Nintendo
Model Number
N64
VB123CGB
VC3234NN
GB4353CB
NS2324TX
H123D23
Third Party Host System
Retail Store System

Fig. 17D

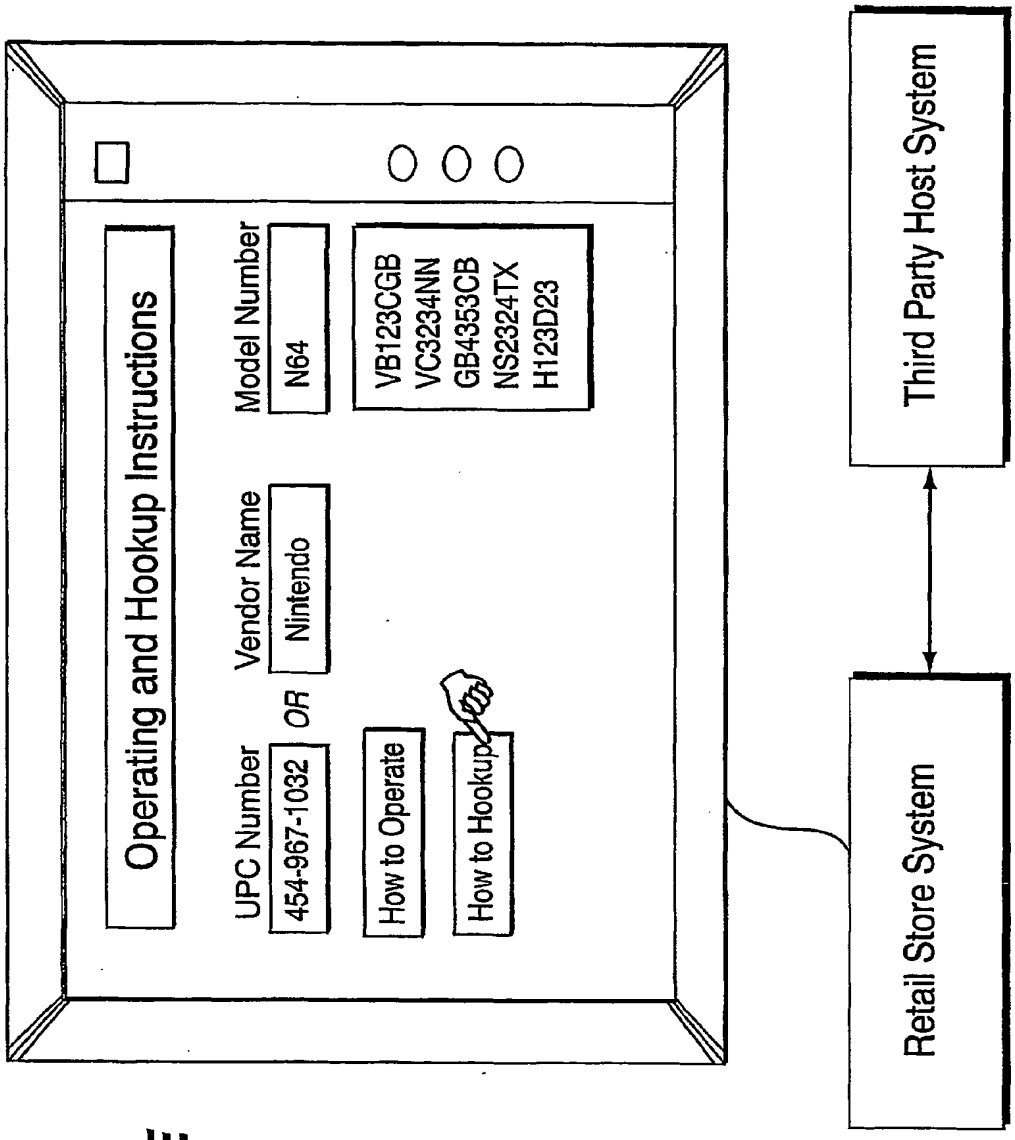

Operating and Hookup Instructions
UPC Number
454-967-1032
OR
Vendor Name
Nintendo
Model Number
N64
VB123CGB
VC3234NN
GB4353CB
NS2324TX
H123D23
How to Operate
How to Hookup
Retail Store System
Third Party Host System

Fig. 17E

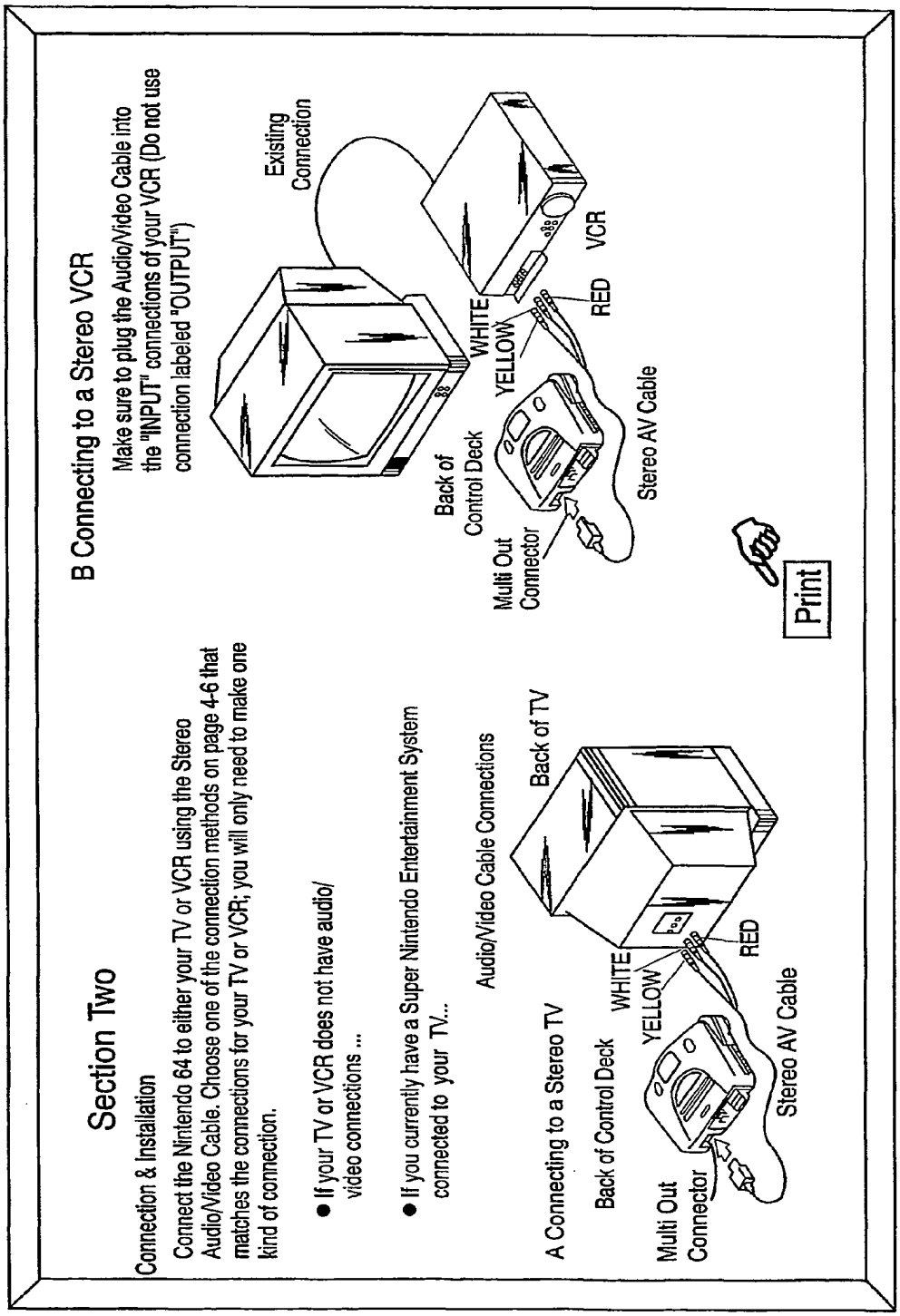

Section Two
Connection & Installation
Connect the Nintendo 64 to either your TV or VCR using the Stereo Audio/Video Cable. Choose one of the connection methods on page 4-6 that matches the connections for your TV or VCR; you will only need to make one kind of connection.
● If your TV or VCR does not have audio/ video connections ...
● If you currently have a Super Nintendo Entertainment System connected to your TV...
Audio/Video Cable Connections
A Connecting to a Stereo TV
Back of TV
Back of Control Deck
WHITE
YELLOW
RED
Multi Out Connector
Stereo AV Cable
B Connecting to a Stereo VCR
Make sure to plug the Audio/Video Cable into the "INPUT" connections of your VCR (Do not use connection labeled "OUTPUT")
Existing Connection
Back of Control Deck
WHITE
YELLOW
RED
VCR
Multi Out Connector
Stereo AV Cable
Print

Fig. 17F

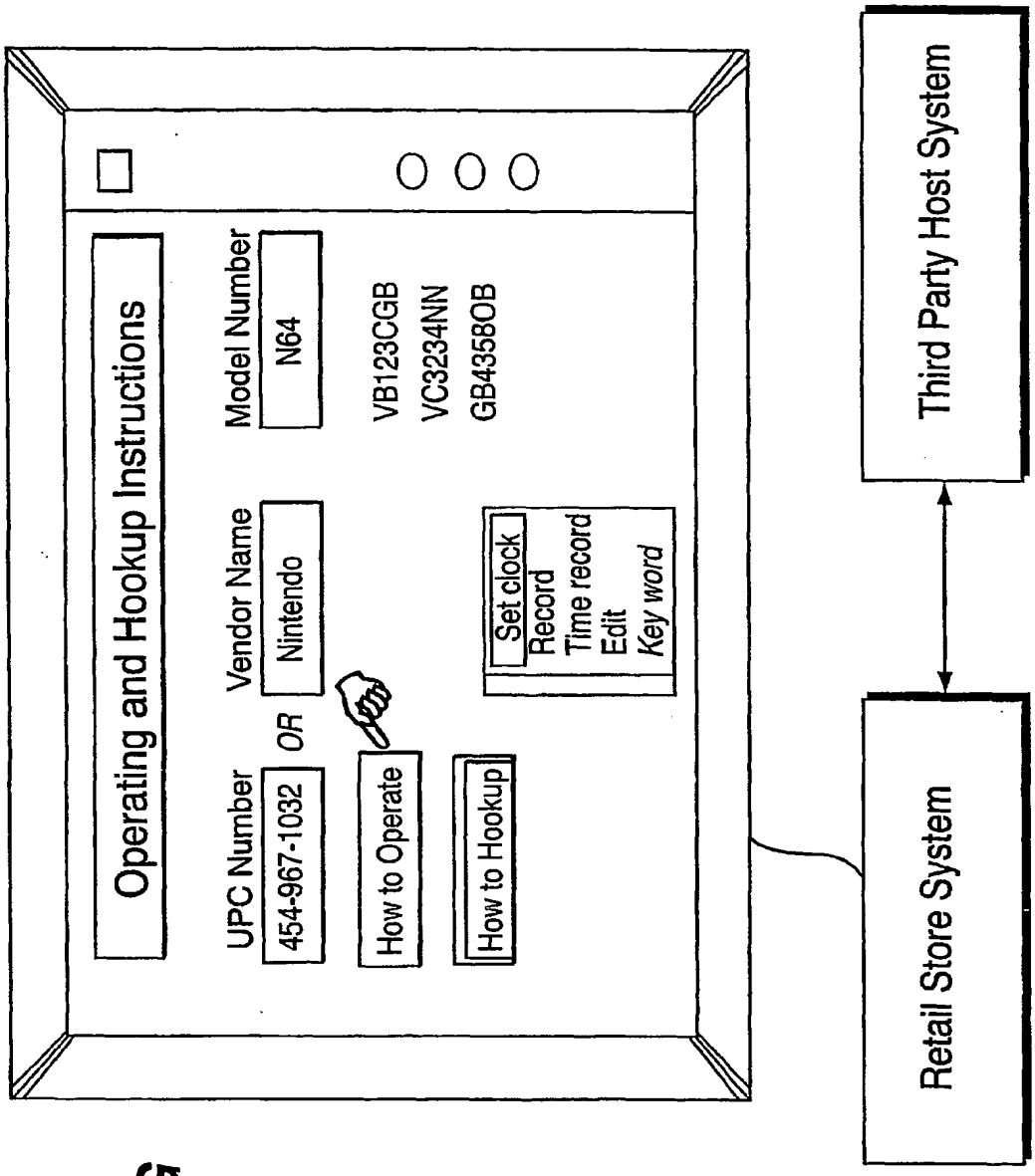

Operating and Hookup Instructions
UPC Number
454-967-1032
OR
Vendor Name
Nintendo
Model Number
N64
VB123CGB
VC3234NN
GB4358OB
How to Operate
How to Hookup
Set clock
Record
Time record
Edit
Key word
Retail Store System
Third Party Host System

Fig. 17G

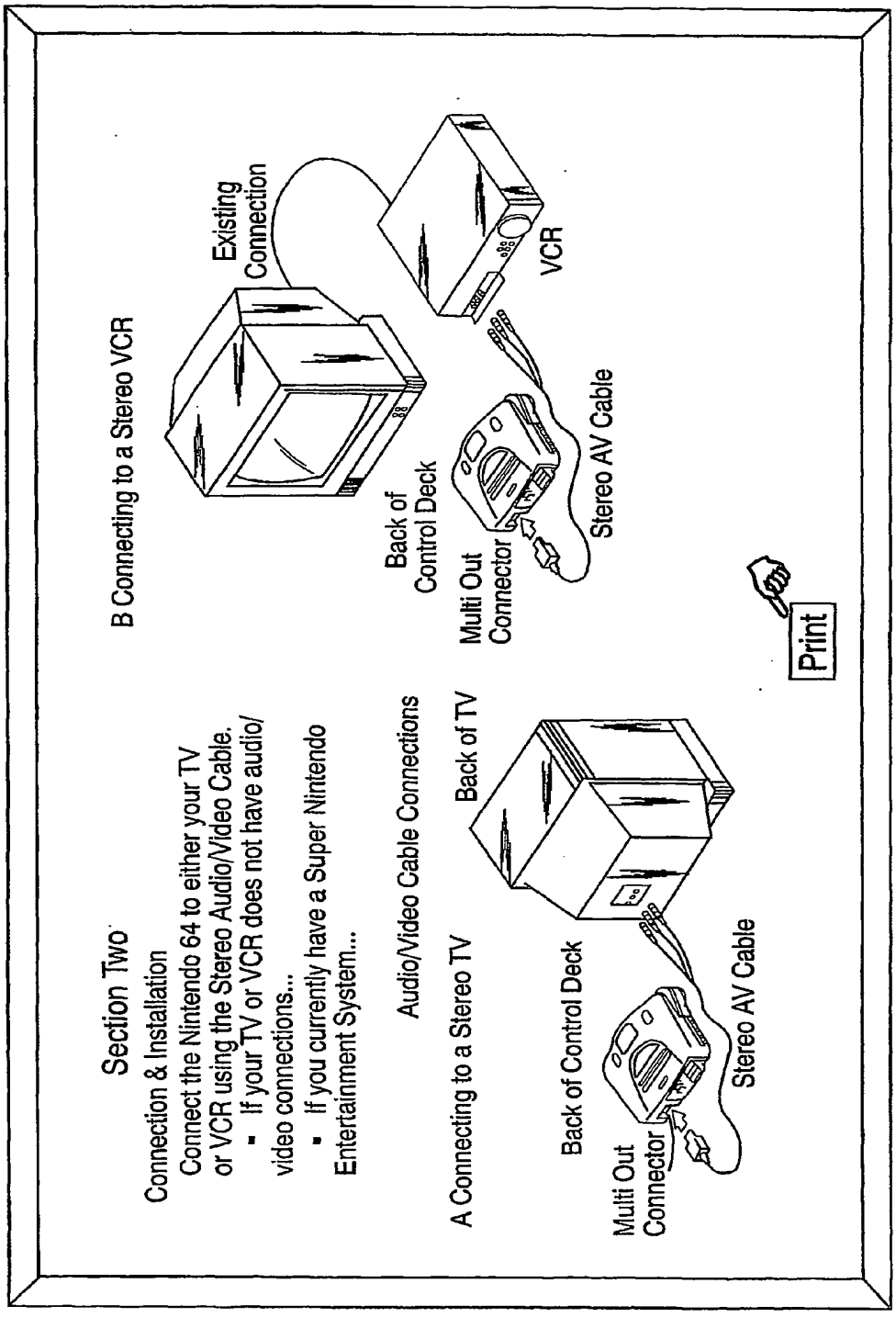

Section Two
Connection & Installation
Connect the Nintendo 64 to either your TV or VCR using the Stereo Audio/Video Cable.
▪ If your TV or VCR does not have audio/video connections...
▪ If you currently have a Super Nintendo Entertainment System...
Audio/Video Cable Connections
A Connecting to a Stereo TV
Back of TV
Back of Control Deck
Multi Out Connector
Stereo AV Cable
B Connecting to a Stereo VCR
Existing Connection
VCR
Back of Control Deck
Multi Out Connector
Stereo AV Cable
Print

Fig. 17H

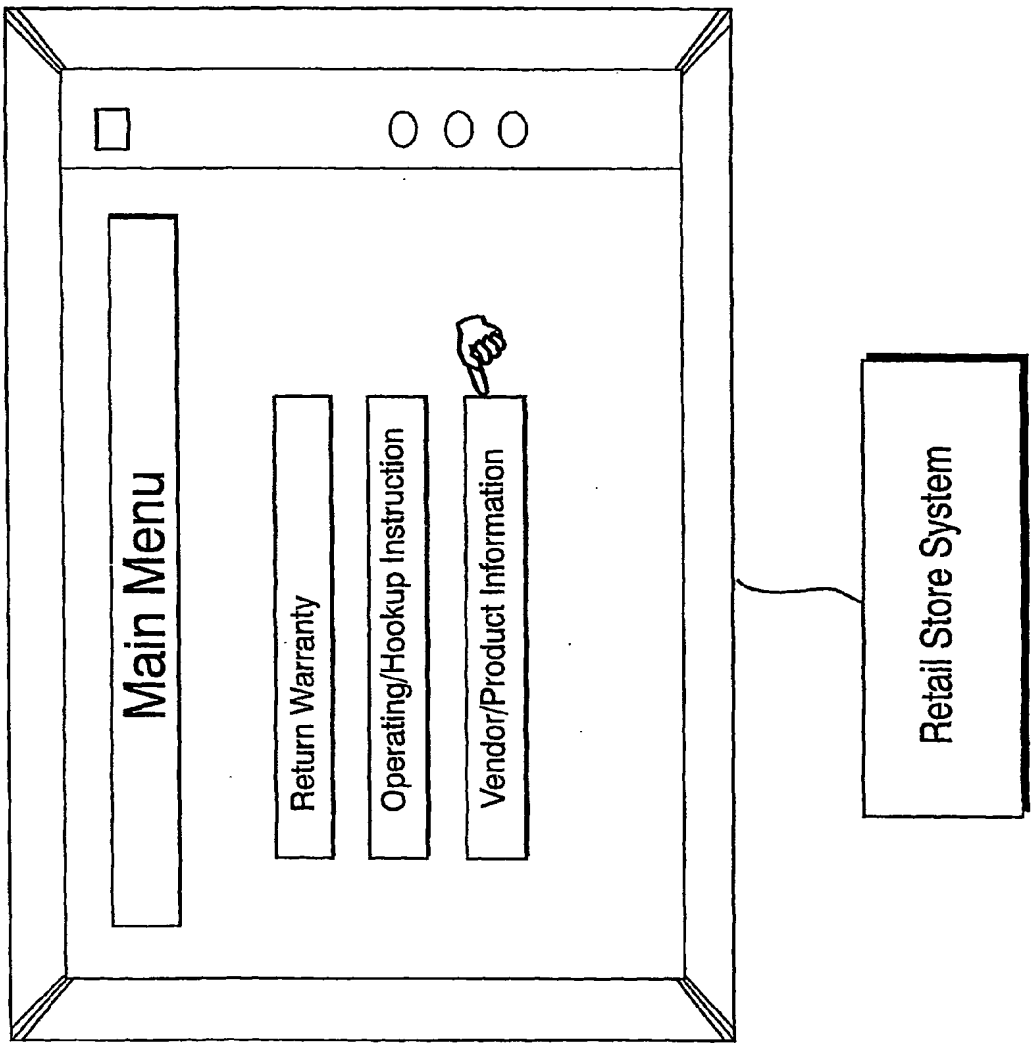

Main Menu
Return Warranty
Operating/Hookup Instruction
Vendor/Product Information
Retail Store System

Fig. 18A

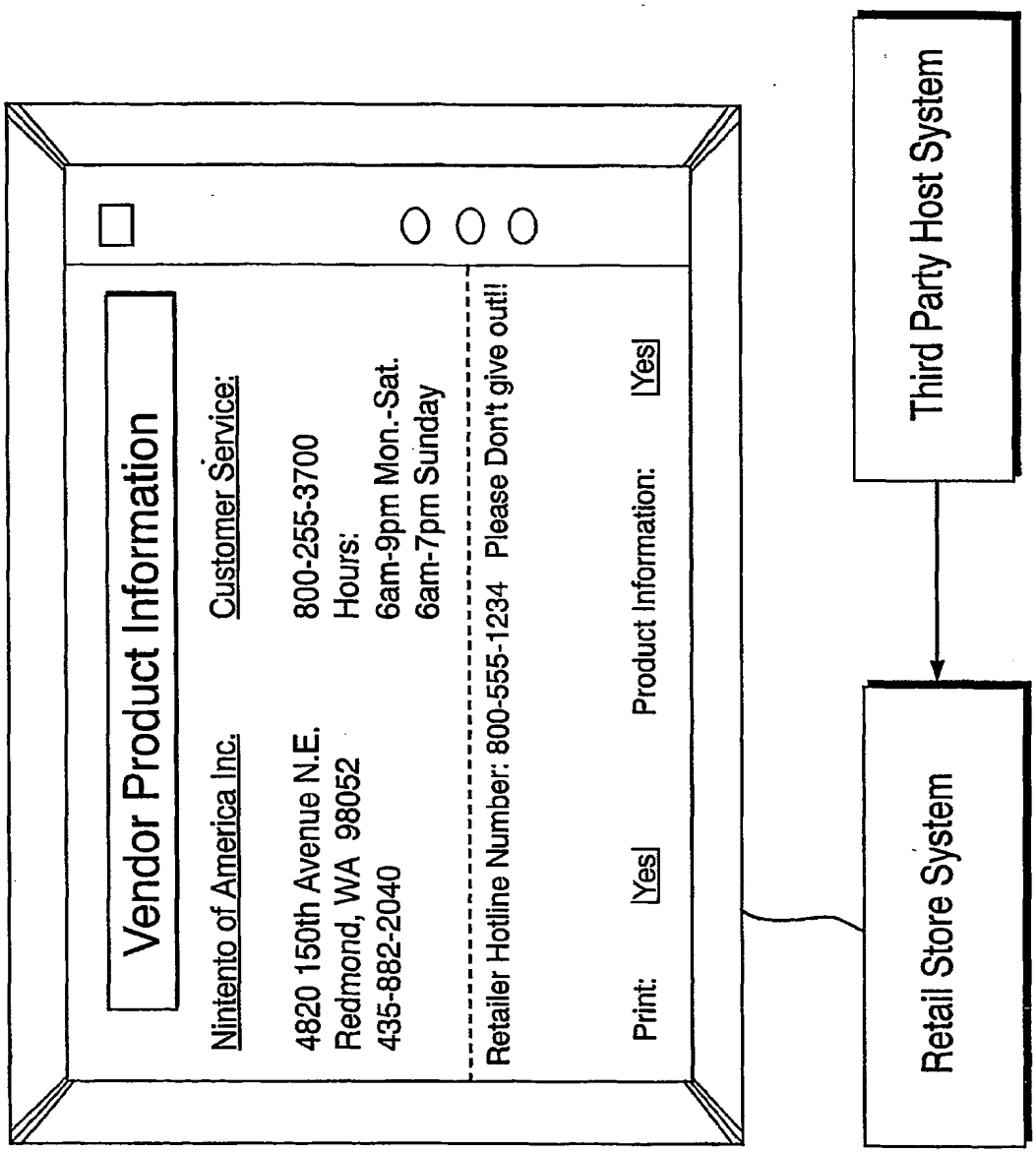

Vendor Product Information
Nintento of America Inc.
4820 150th Avenue N.E.
Redmond, WA 98052
435-882-2040
Customer Service:
800-255-3700
Hours:
6am-9pm Mon.-Sat.
6am-7pm Sunday
Retailer Hotline Number: 800-555-1234 Please Don't give out!!
Print: Yes
Product Information: Yes
Third Party Host System
Retail Store System

Fig. 18B

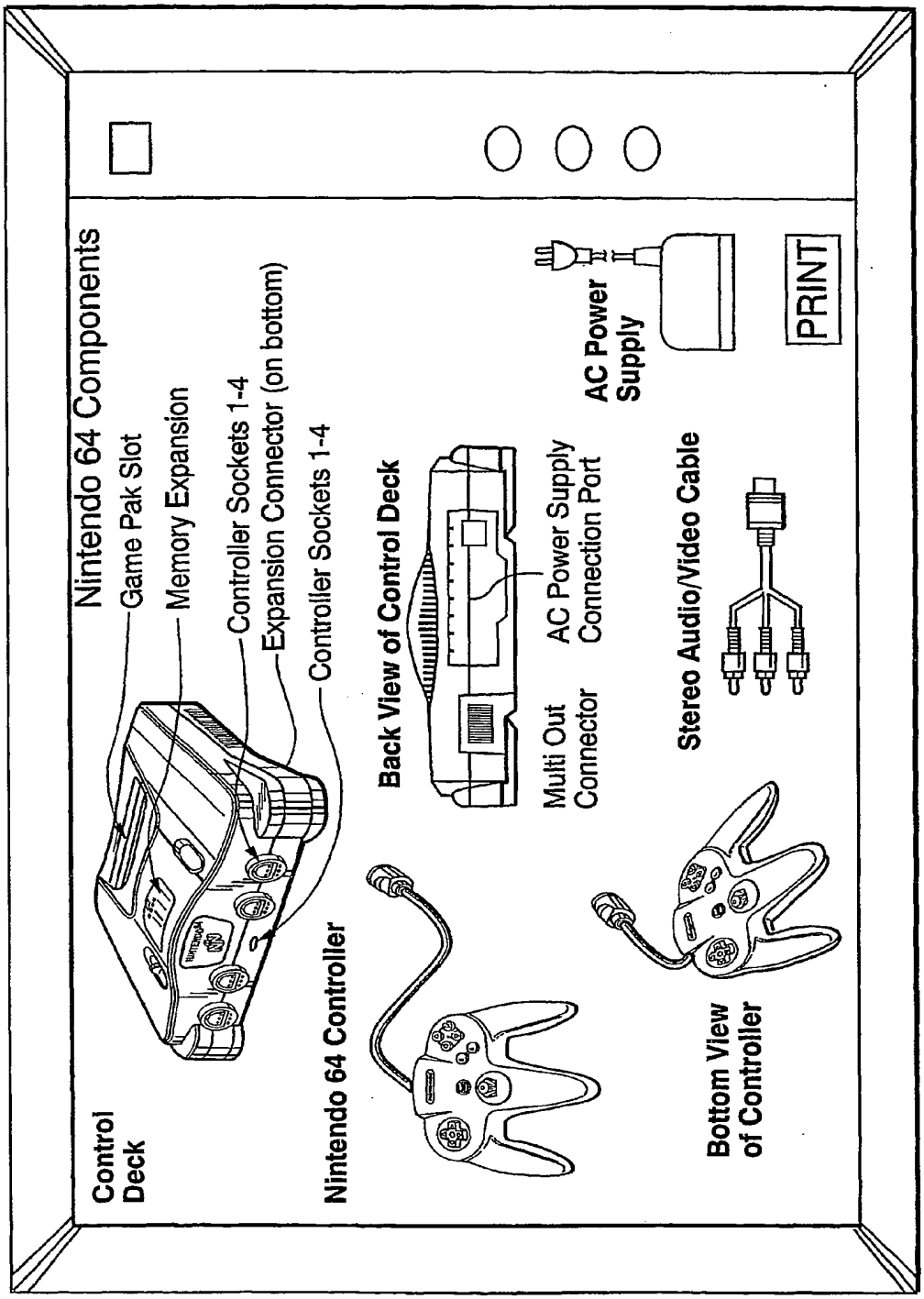

Nintendo 64 Components
Game Pak Slot
Memory Expansion
Controller Sockets 1-4
Expansion Connector (on bottom)
Controller Sockets 1-4
Control Deck
Nintendo 64 Controller
Back View of Control Deck
Multi Out Connector
AC Power Supply Connection Port
AC Power Supply
PRINT
Stereo Audio/Video Cable
Bottom View of Controller

Fig. 18C

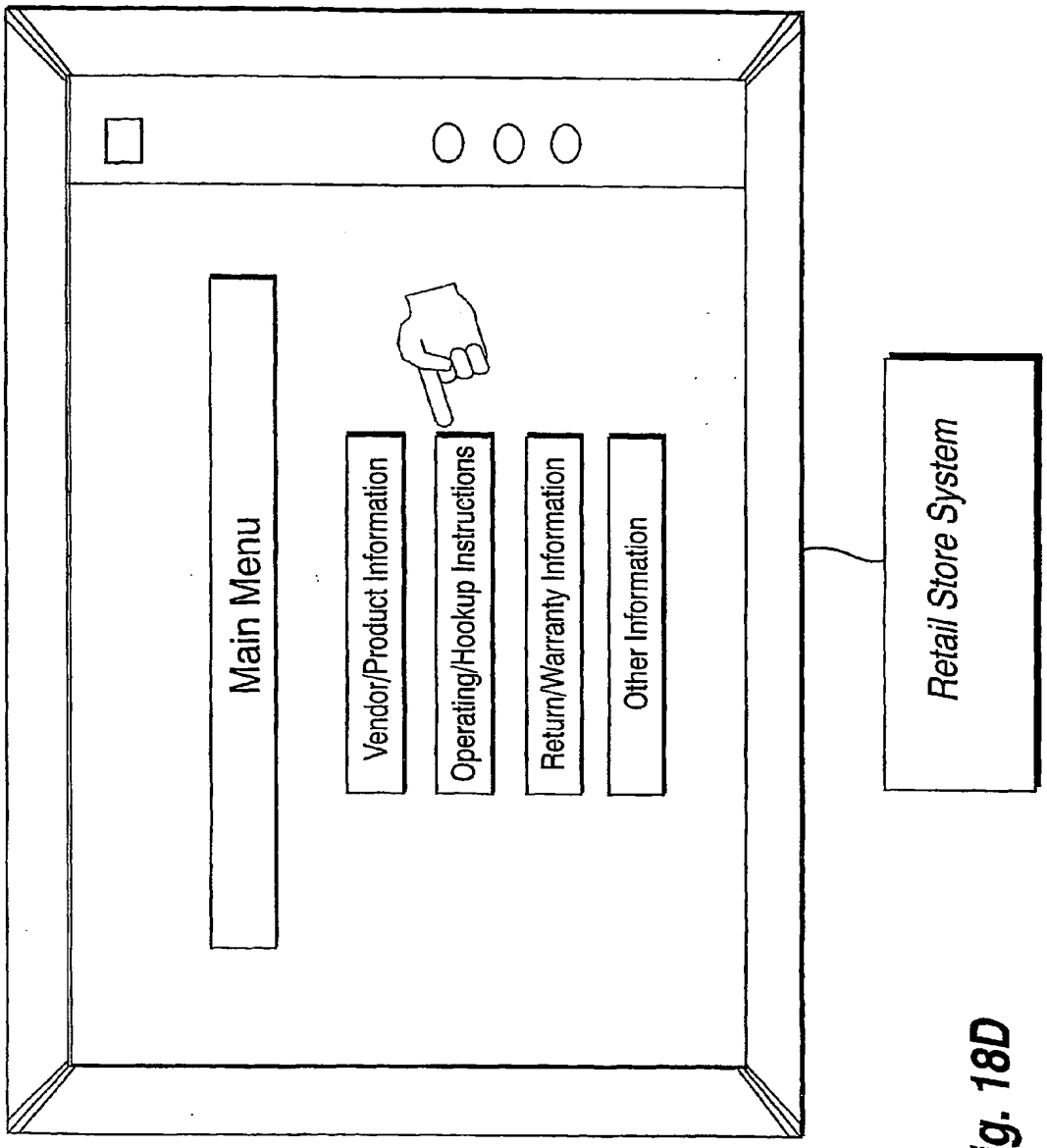

Main Menu
Vendor/Product Information
Operating/Hookup Instructions
Return/Warranty Information
Other Information
Retail Store System

Fig. 18D

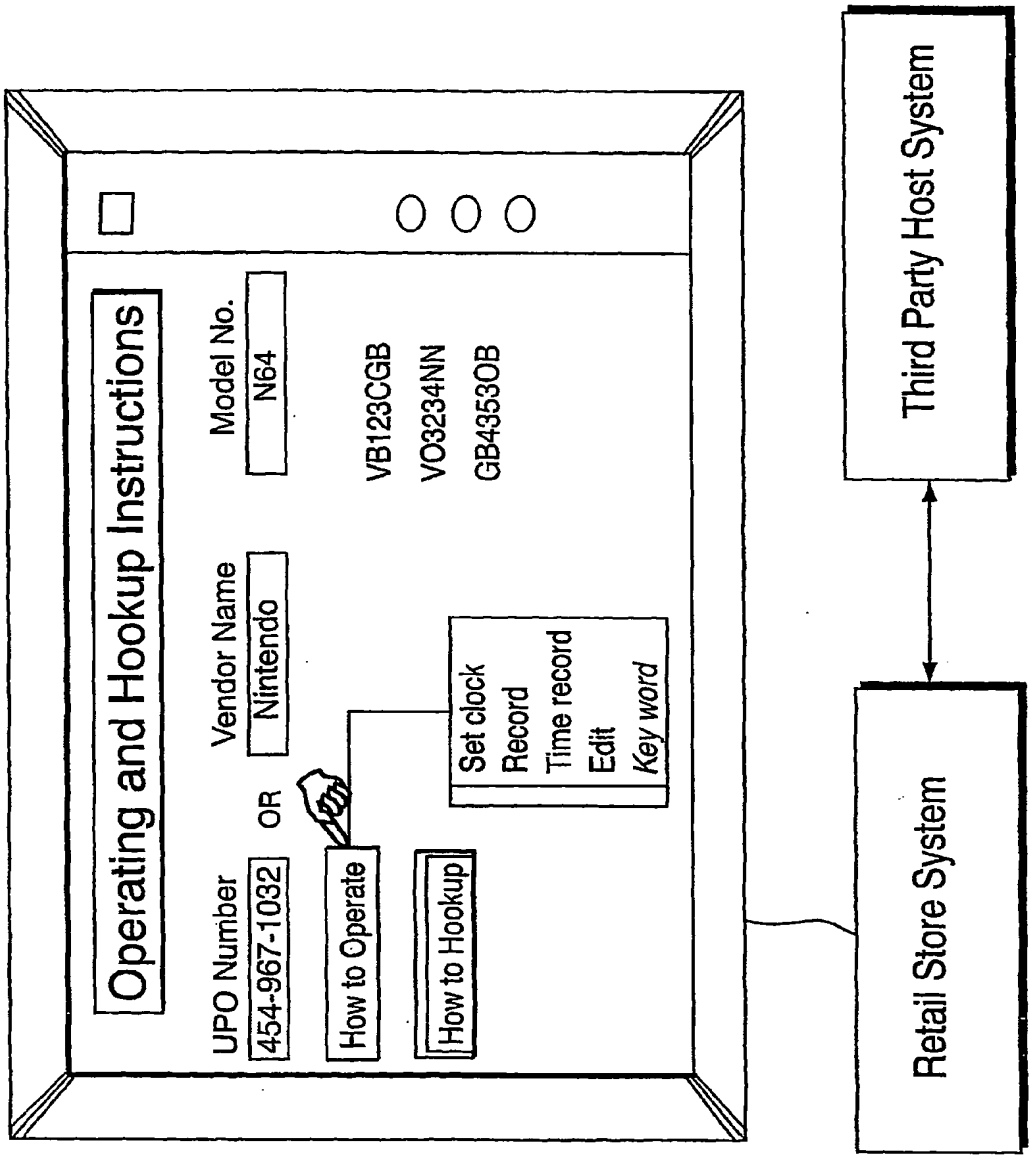

Operating and Hookup Instructions
UPO Number
454-967-1032
OR
Vendor Name
Nintendo
Model No.
N64
VB123CGB
VO3234NN
GB4353OB
How to Operate
How to Hookup
Set clock
Record
Time record
Edit
Key word
Retail Store System
Third Party Host System

Fig. 18E

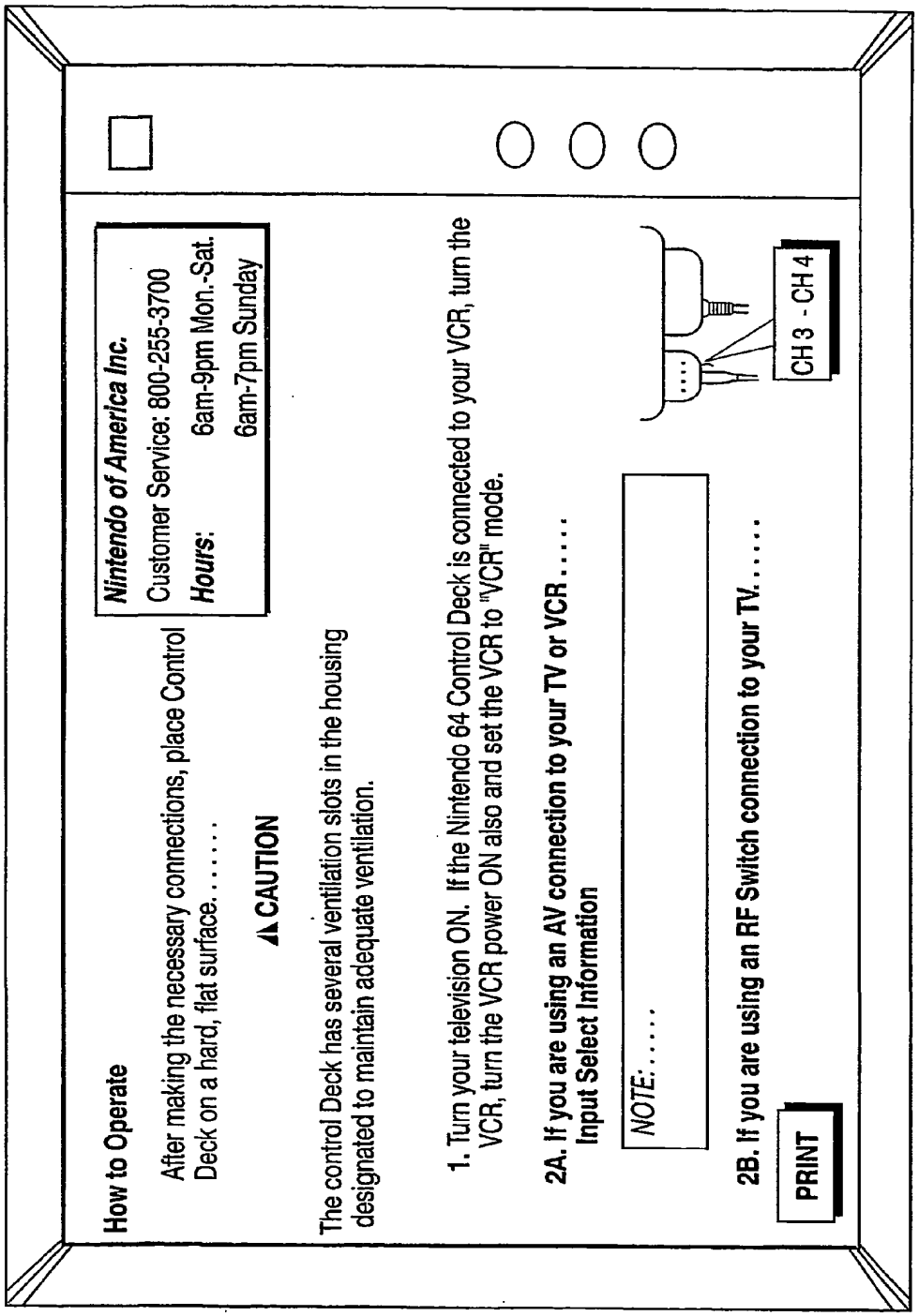

How to Operate
After making the necessary connections, place Control Deck on a hard, flat surface. . . . . .
CAUTION
The control Deck has several ventilation slots in the housing designated to maintain adequate ventilation.
Nintendo of America Inc.
Customer Service: 800-255-3700
Hours: 6am-9pm Mon.-Sat.
6am-7pm Sunday
1. Turn your television ON. If the Nintendo 64 Control Deck is connected to your VCR, turn the VCR, turn the VCR power ON also and set the VCR to "VCR" mode.
2A. If you are using an AV connection to your TV or VCR . . . . .
Input Select Information
NOTE: . . . . .
2B. If you are using an RF Switch connection to your TV. . . . . .
CH 3 - CH 4
PRINT

Fig. 18F

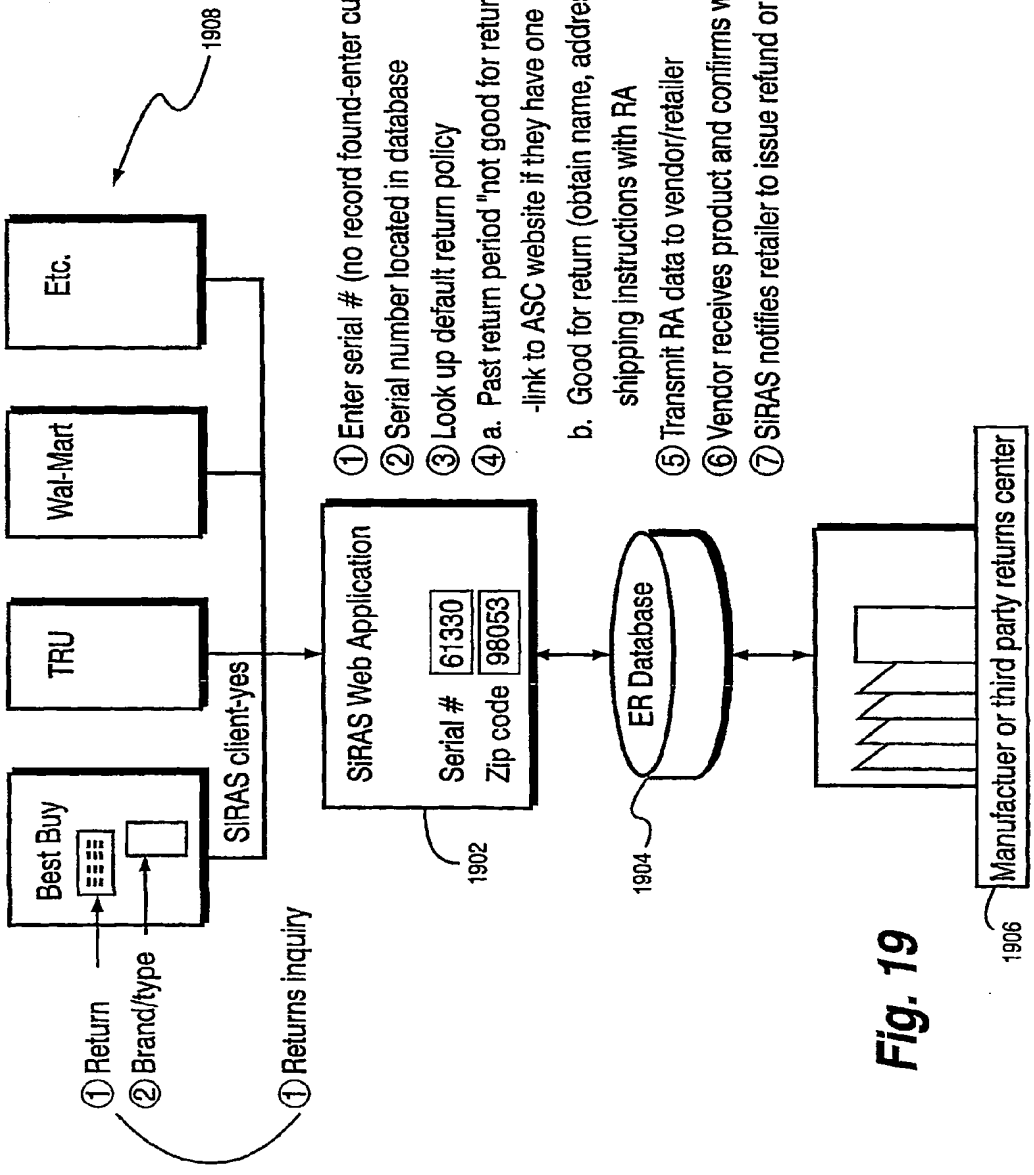

1908
Etc.
Wal-Mart
TRU
Best Buy
SiRAS client-yes
① Returns inquiry
① Return
② Brand/type
SiRAS Web Application
Serial # 61330
Zip code 98053
1902
① Enter serial # (no record found-enter customer number)
② Serial number located in database
③ Look up default return policy
④ a. Past return period "not good for return" display ASC information
-link to ASC website if they have one
b. Good for return (obtain name, address, phone) issue RA, print out shipping instructions with RA
⑤ Transmit RA data to vendor/retailer
⑥ Vendor receives product and confirms with SiRAS's ER database
⑦ SiRAS notifies retailer to issue refund or exchange.
ER Database
1904
Manufactuer or third party returns center
1906

Fig. 19

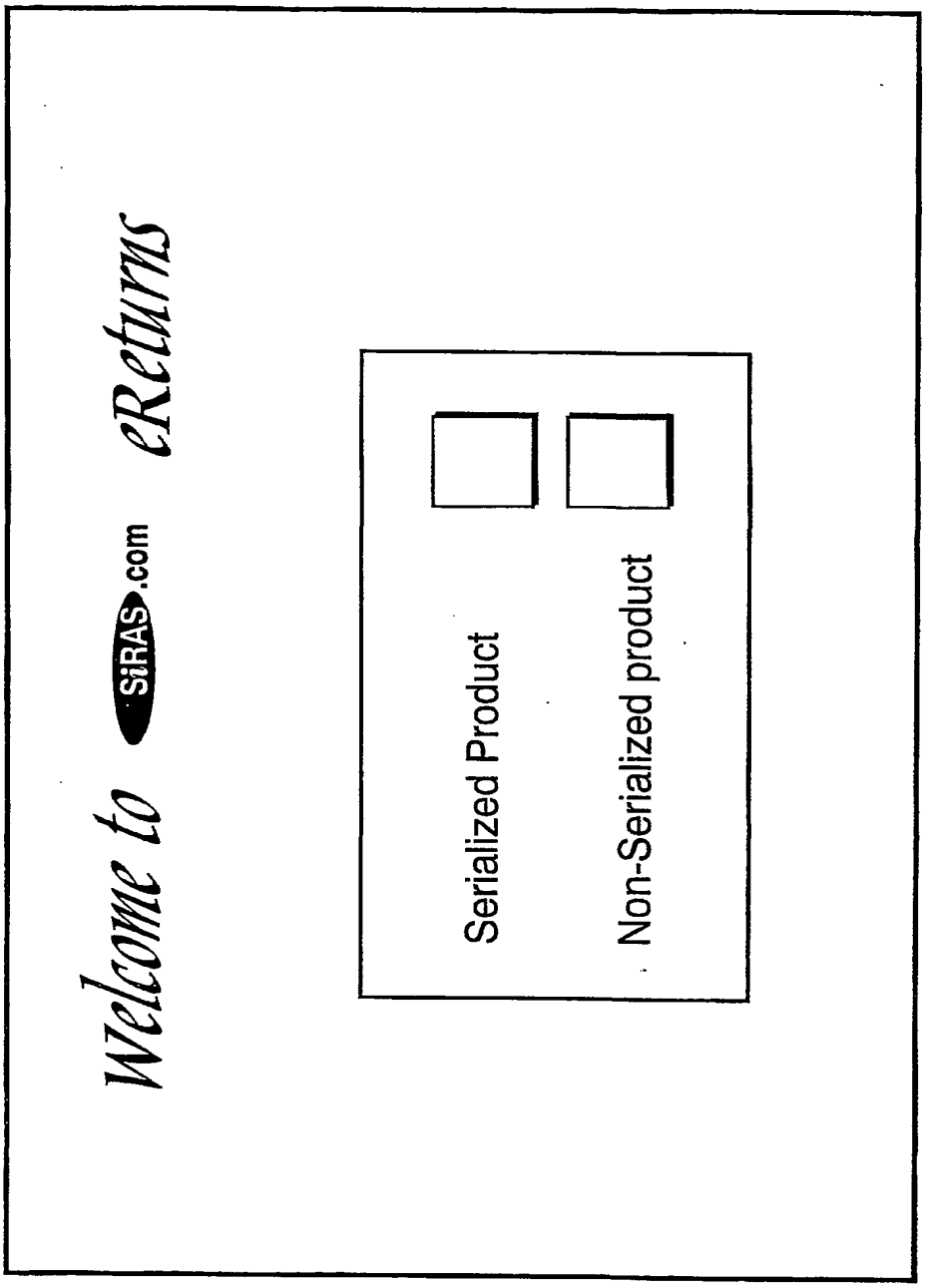

Welcome to SiRAS.com eReturns
Serialized Product
Non-Serialized product

Fig. 20

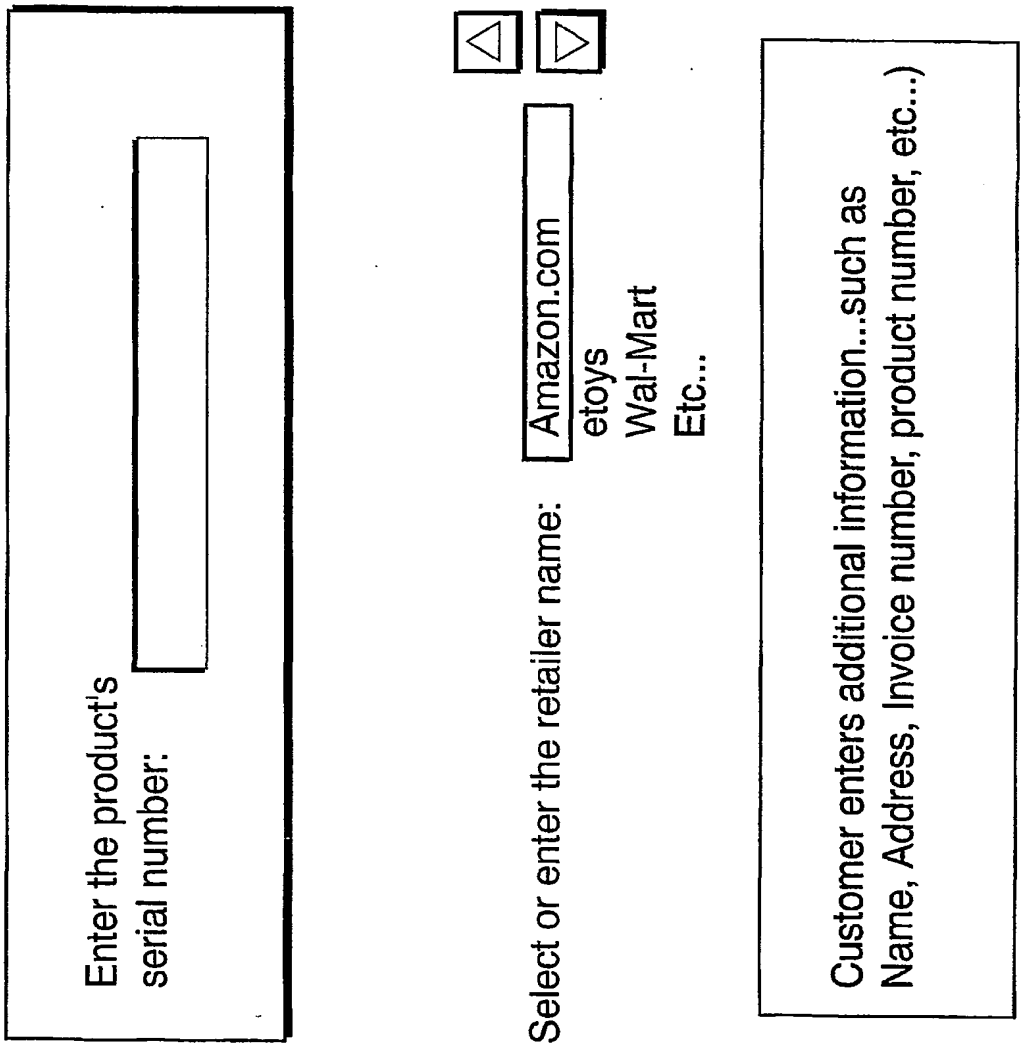

Enter the product's serial number:
Select or enter the retailer name:
Amazon.com
etoys
Wal-Mart
Etc...
Customer enters additional information...such as Name, Address, Invoice number, product number, etc...)

Fig. 21

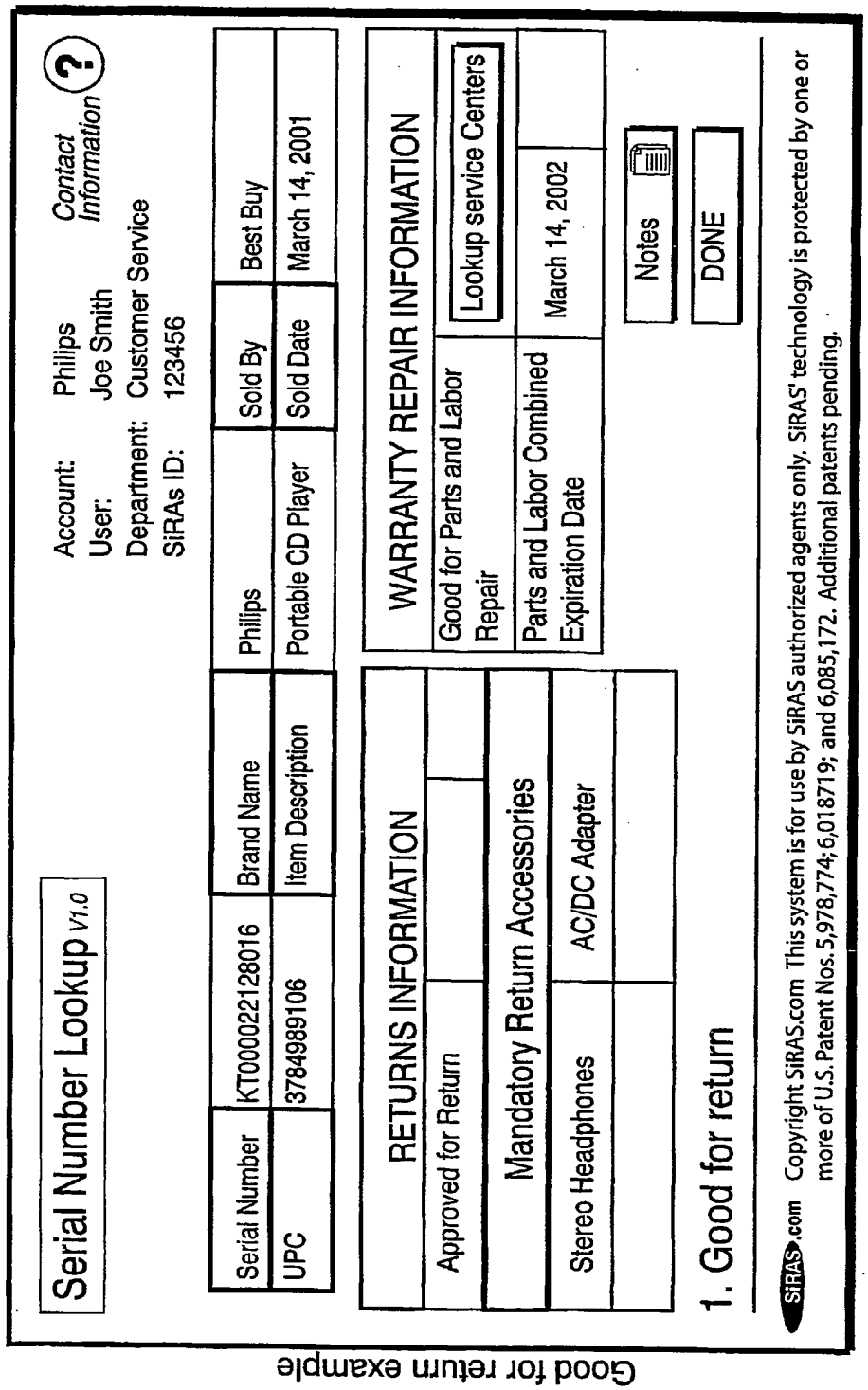
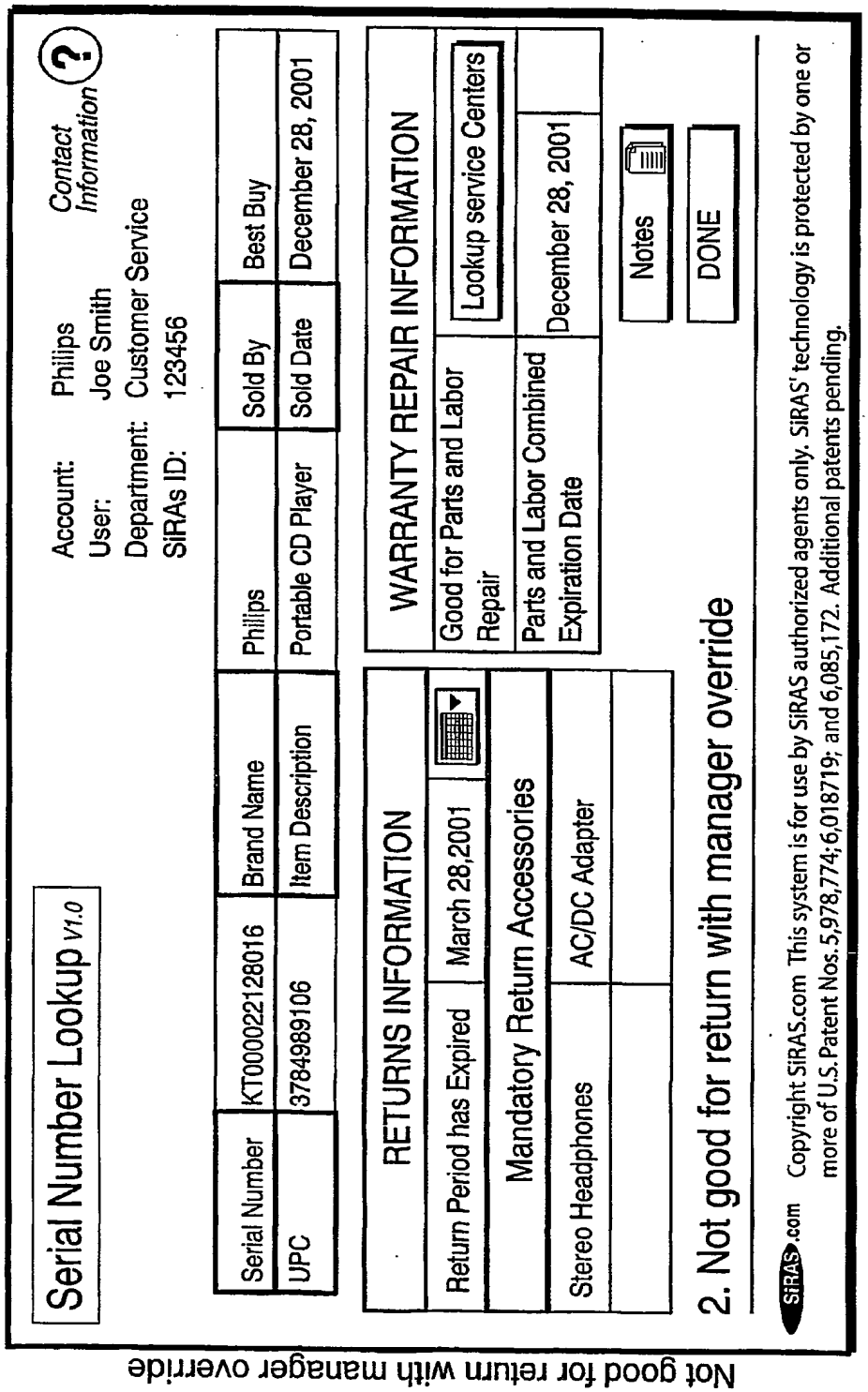


Fig. 22
1. Scan UPC or Select Brand name
2. Scan Serial Number
Serial Number Lookup V1.0
Account: Philips
User: Joe Smith
Department: Customer Service
SiRAs ID: 123456
Contact Information
Serial Number
KT000022128016
Brand Name
Philips
Sold By
Best Buy
UPC
3784989106
Item Description
Portable CD Player
Sold Date
March 14, 2001
RETURNS INFORMATION
Approved for Return
Mandatory Return Accessories
Stereo Headphones
AC/DC Adapter
WARRANTY REPAIR INFORMATION
Good for Parts and Labor Repair
Lookup service Centers
Parts and Labor Combined Expiration Date
March 14, 2002
Notes
DONE
1. Good for return
SiRAS.com Copyright SiRAS.com This system is for use by SiRAS authorized agents only. SiRAS' technology is protected by one or more of U.S. Patent Nos. 5,978,774; 6,018719; and 6,085,172. Additional patents pending.
Good for return example
Retailer interface options with SiRAS include : Internet, direct connect, host-to-host, and other customized solutions.

Fig. 23

1. Scan UPC or Select Brand name
2. Scan Serial Number



Not good for return with manager override

Retailer interface options with SIRAS include : Internet, direct connect, host-to-host, and other customized solutions.

Fig. 24

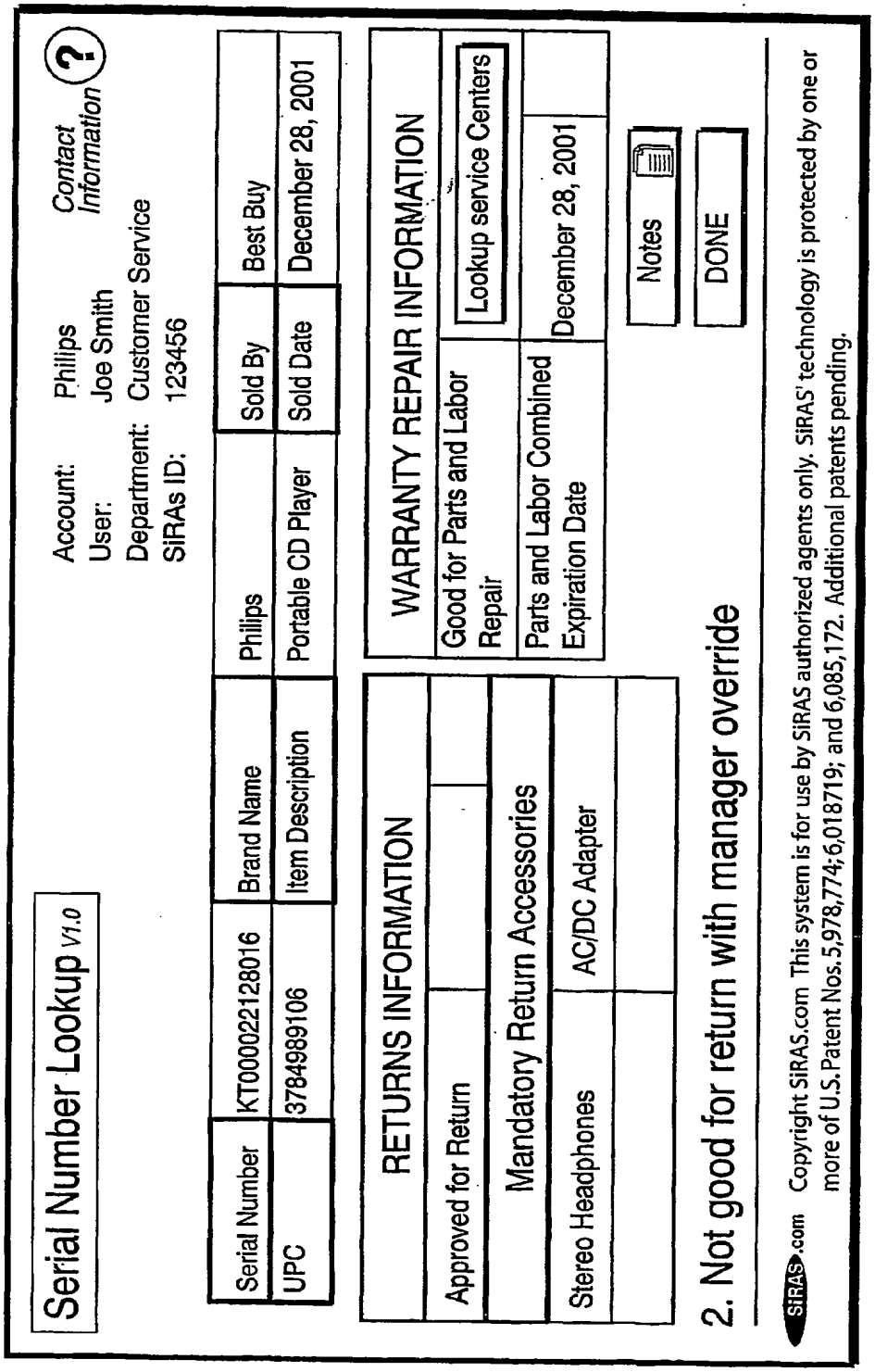

Not good for return with manager override
Serial Number Lookup V1.0
Account: Philips
User: Joe Smith
Department: Customer Service
SiRAs ID: 123456
Contact Information
Serial Number
KT00002128016
Brand Name
Philips
Sold By
Best Buy
UPC
3784989106
Item Description
Portable CD Player
Sold Date
December 28, 2001
RETURNS INFORMATION
Approved for Return
WARRANTY REPAIR INFORMATION
Good for Parts and Labor Repair
Lookup service Centers
Parts and Labor Combined Expiration Date
December 28, 2001
Mandatory Return Accessories
Stereo Headphones
AC/DC Adapter
Notes
DONE
2. Not good for return with manager override
SiRAs.com Copyright SiRAS.com This system is for use by SiRAS authorized agents only. SiRAS' technology is protected by one or more of U.S. Patent Nos. 5,978,774; 6,018719; and 6,085,172. Additional patents pending.

Fig. 25 Not good for return (less than extended period), good for warranty repair

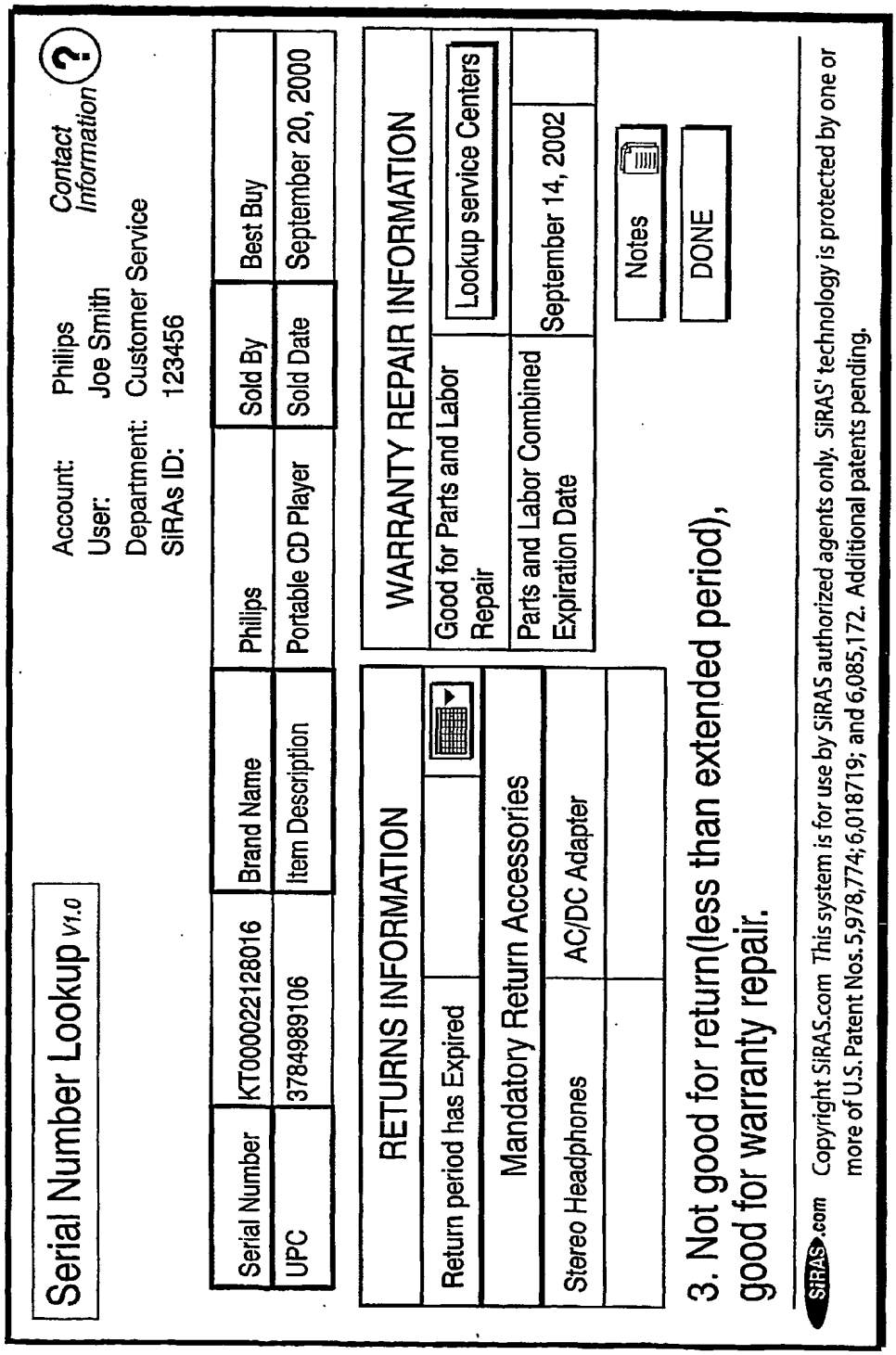


Fig. 26 Not good for return (less than extended period), good for warranty repair

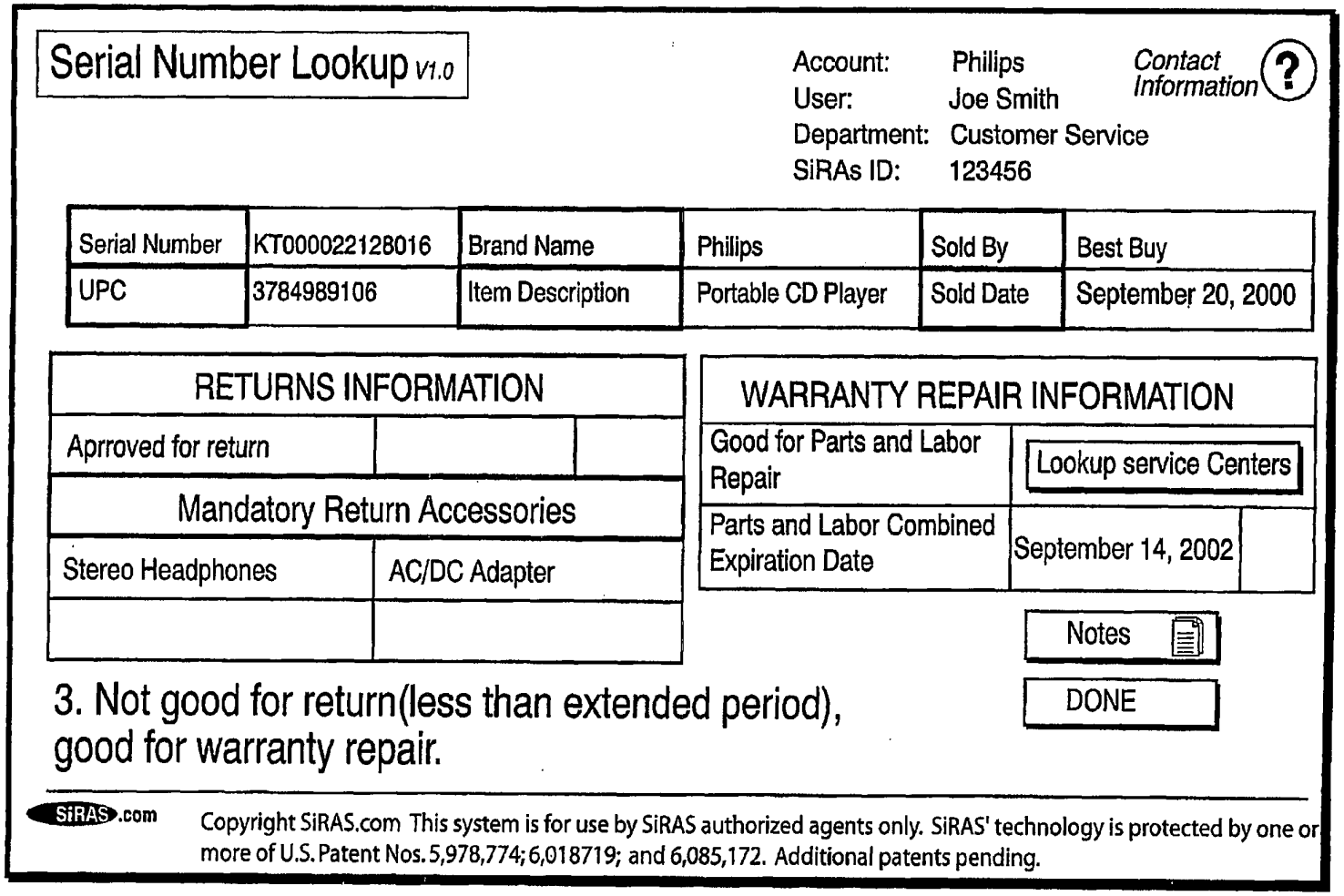


Fig. 27 Not good for return (greater than extended period), good for warranty repair

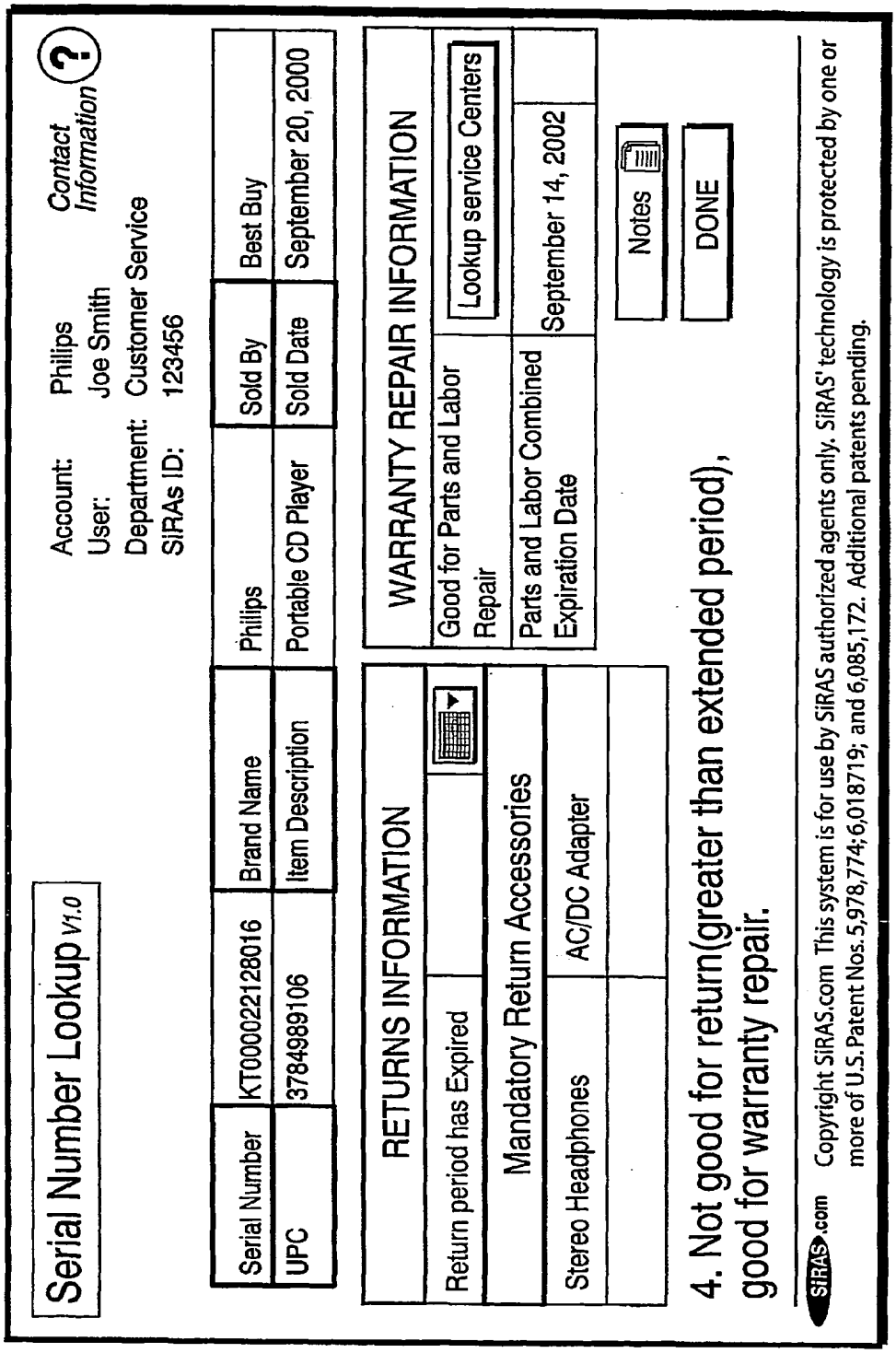


Fig. 28 Not good for return (greater than extended period), good for warranty repair

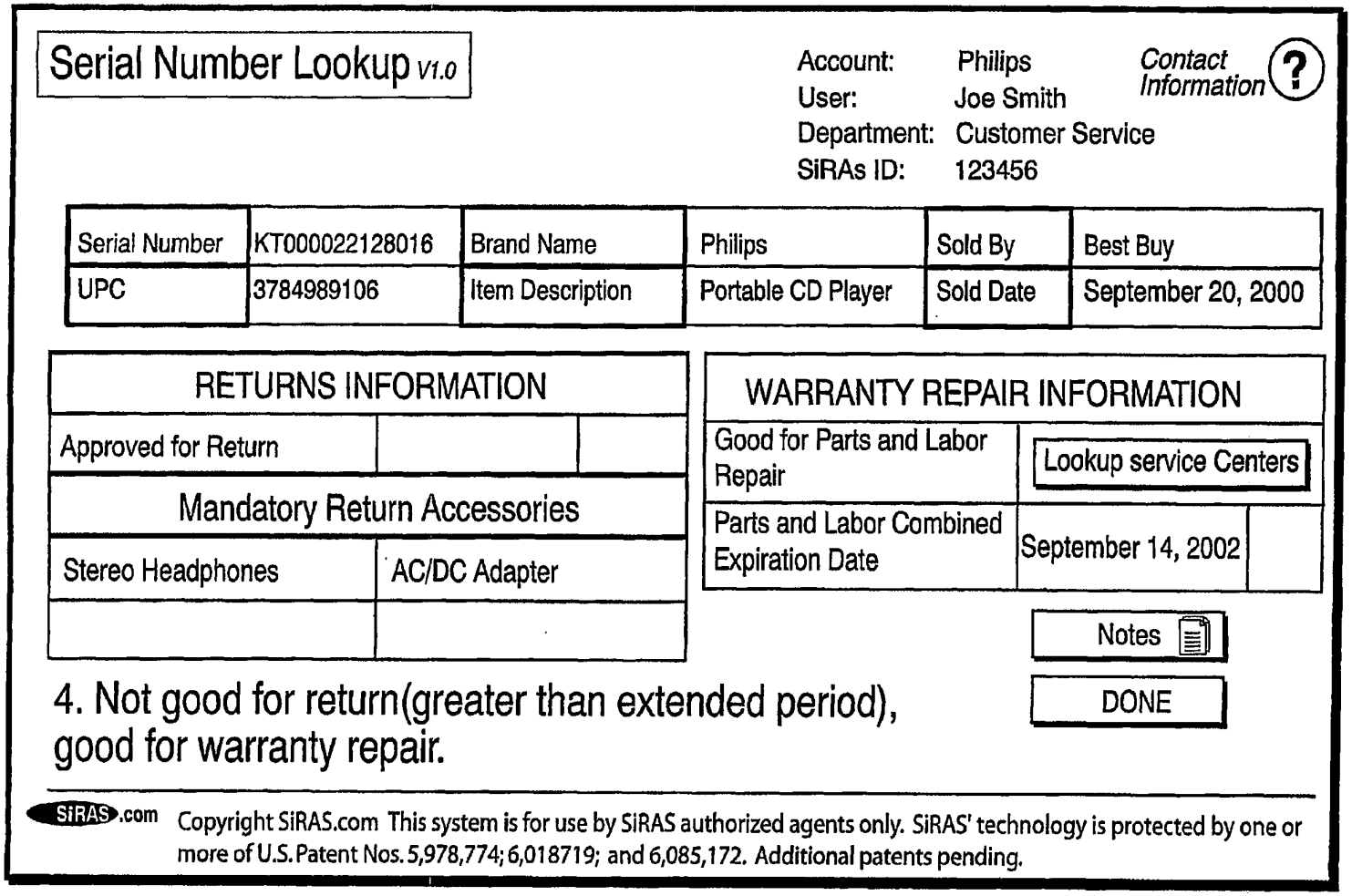


Fig. 29 Not good for return (no override), not good for warranty repair with manager override

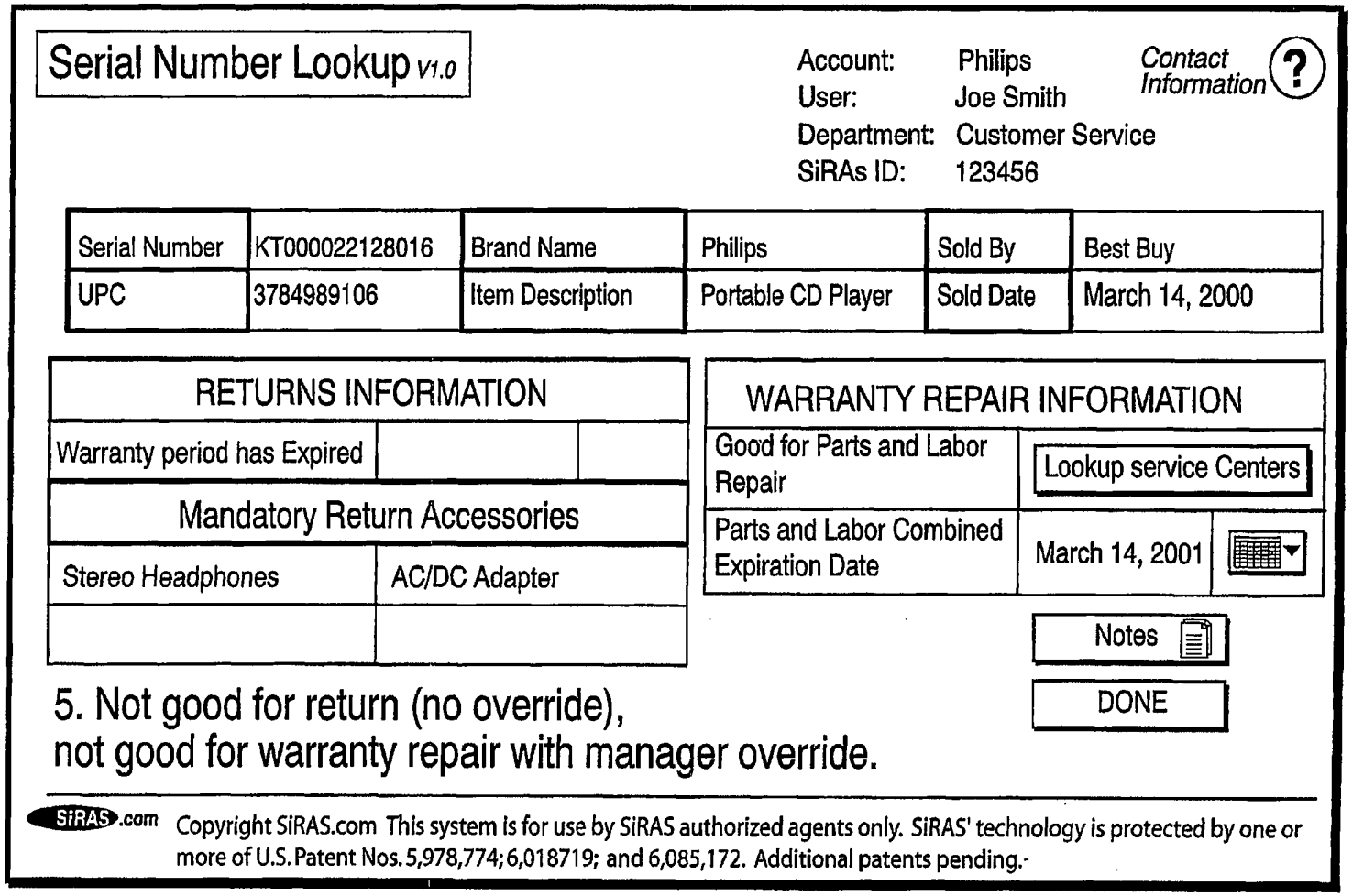


Fig. 30 Not good for return (no override), not good for warranty repair with manager override

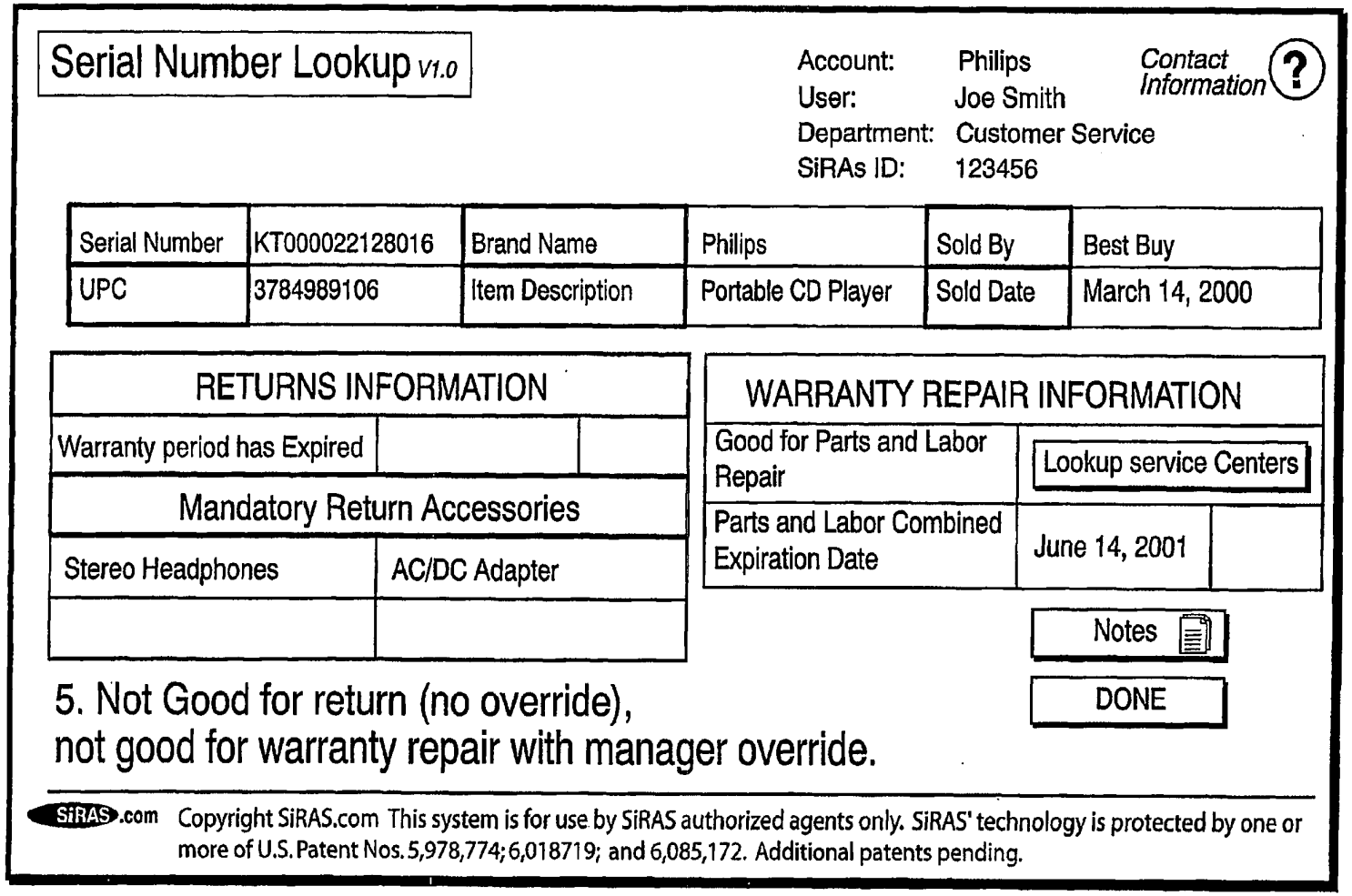


Fig. 31 All expired (no override), repair center lookup

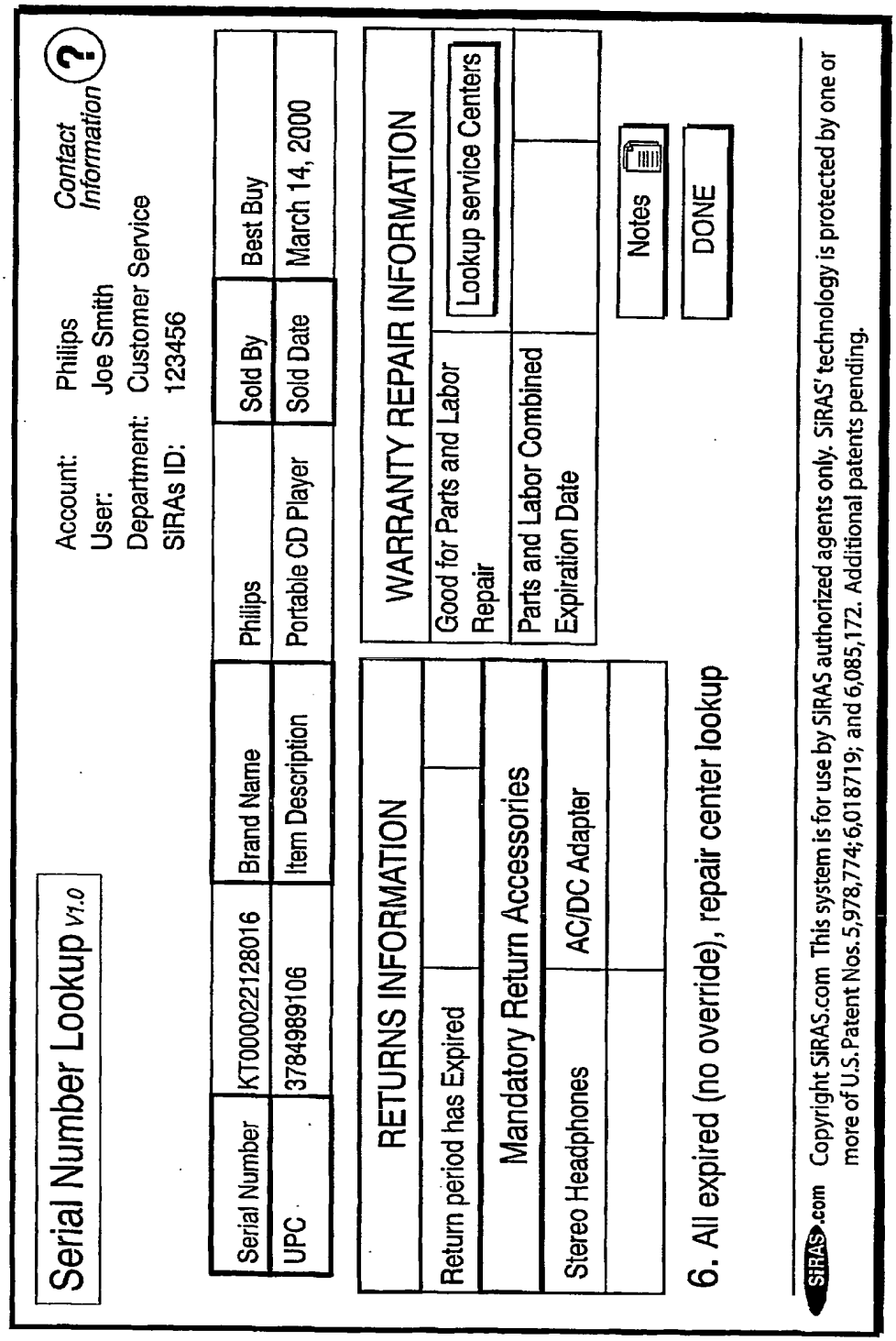
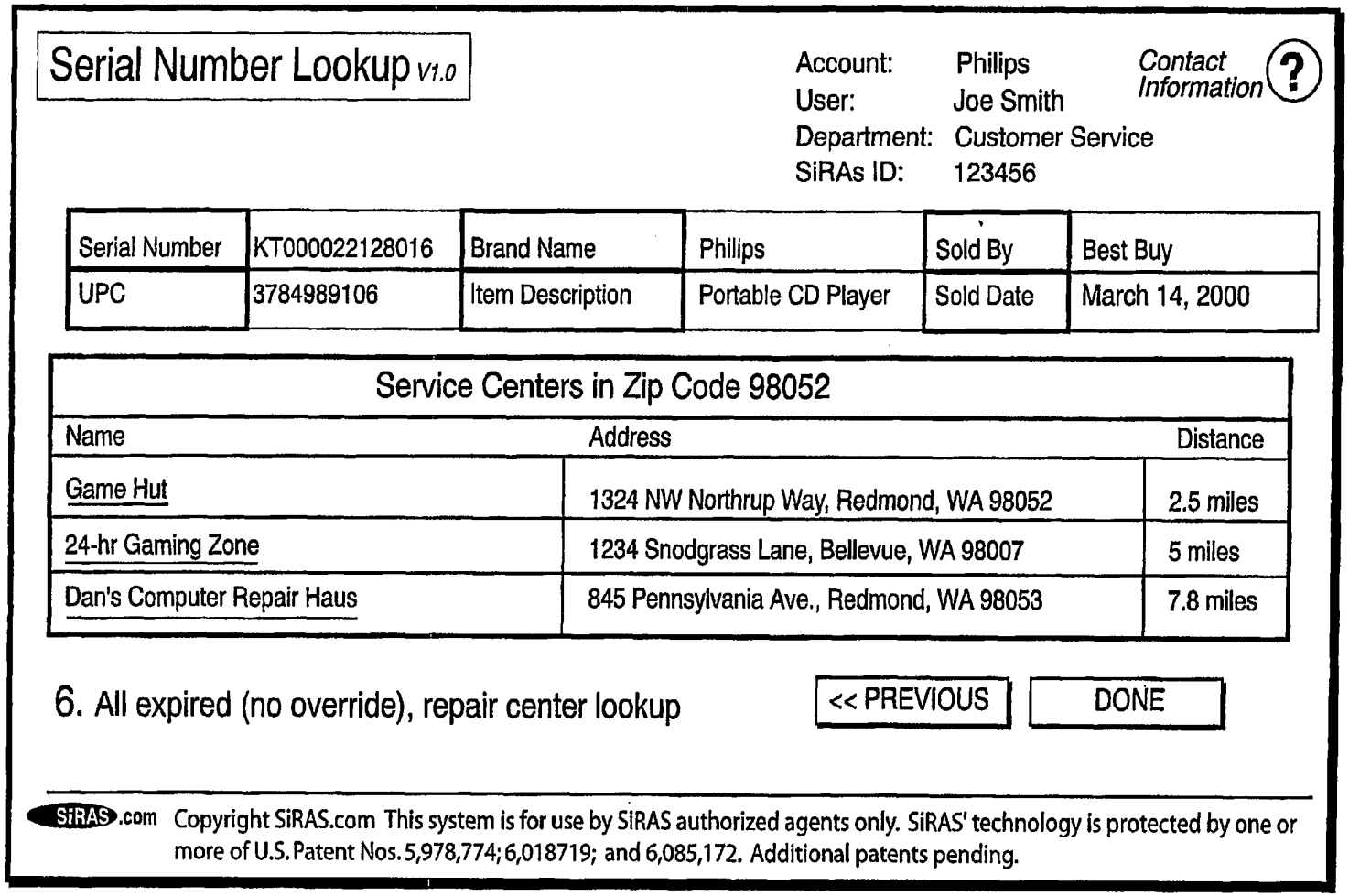


Fig. 32 All expired (no override), repair center lookup



Serial Number Lookup V1.0

Account: Philips
User: Joe Smith
Department: Customer Service
SiRAs ID: 123456

Contact Information ?

Serial Number	KT000022128016	Brand Name	Philips	Sold By	Best Buy
UPC	3784989106	Item Description	Portable CD Player	Sold Date	March 14, 2000

Service Centers in Zip Code 98052

Name	Address	Distance
Game Hut	1324 NW Northrup Way, Redmond, WA 98052	2.5 miles
24-hr Gaming Zone	1234 Snodgrass Lane, Bellevue, WA 98007	5 miles
Dan's Computer Repair Haus	845 Pennsylvania Ave., Redmond, WA 98053	7.8 miles

6. All expired (no override), repair center lookup

<< PREVIOUS DONE

SiRAS.com Copyright SiRAS.com This system is for use by SiRAS authorized agents only. SiRAS' technology is protected by one or more of U.S. Patent Nos. 5,978,774; 6,018719; and 6,085,172. Additional patents pending.

Fig. 33 All expired (no override), repair center lookup

Serial Number Lookup V1.0

Account: Philips
User: Joe Smith
Department: Customer Service
SiRAs ID: 123456

Contact Information ?

Game Hut	
Address	1324 NW Northrup Way, Redmond, WA 98052-3523
Phone Number	(425) 497-7000
Additional Information	Corner of S 180th and Hwy 167 Power swap on site (all systems). Personal repairs are sent to main location. Ask about repair times. Storre hours: 9:00 AM-5:00 PM M-F 9:00 AM-4:00 PM Sat Closed Sundays.

6. All expired (no override), repair center lookup

<< PREVIOUS DONE

Fig. 34 Non-participating manufacturer

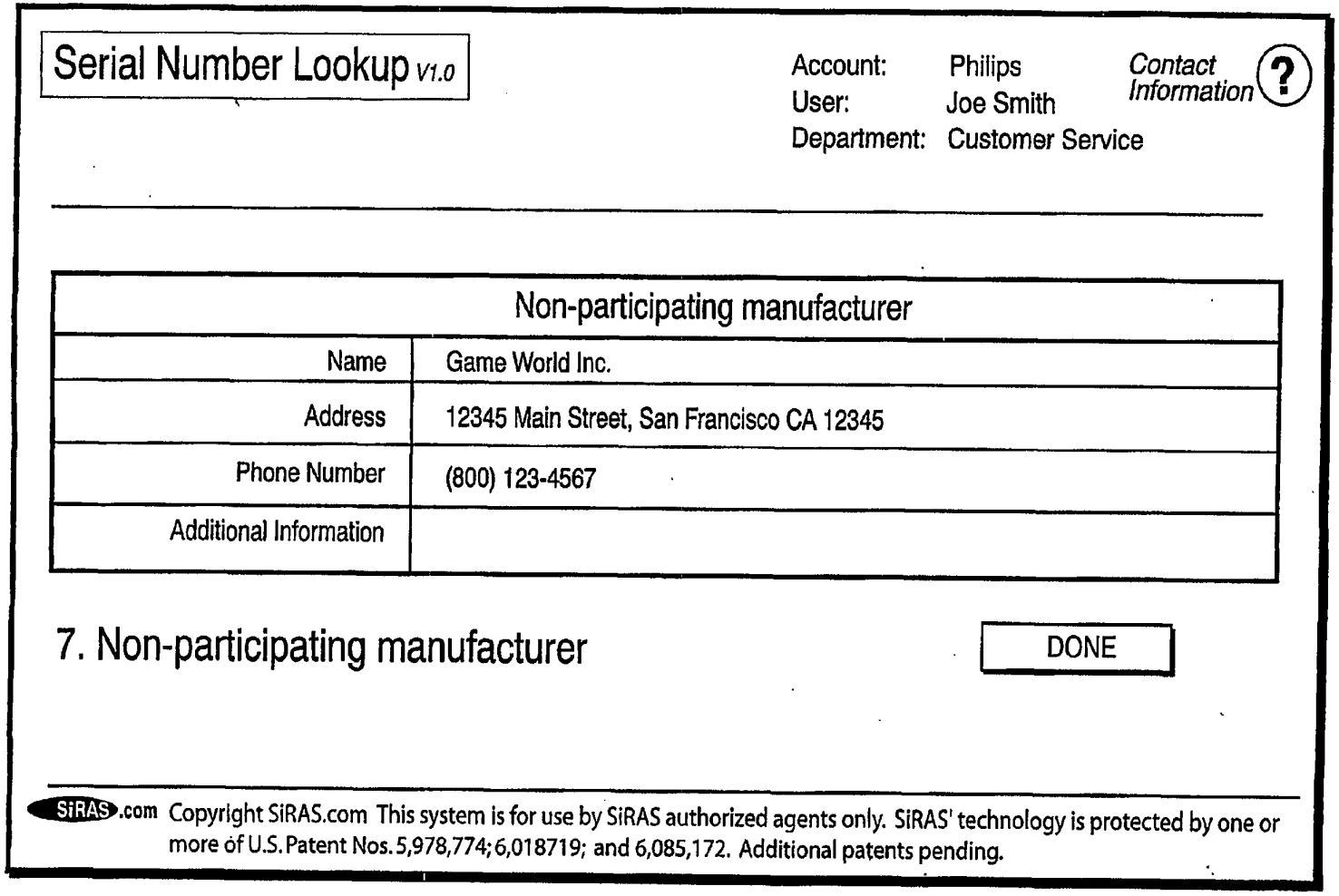
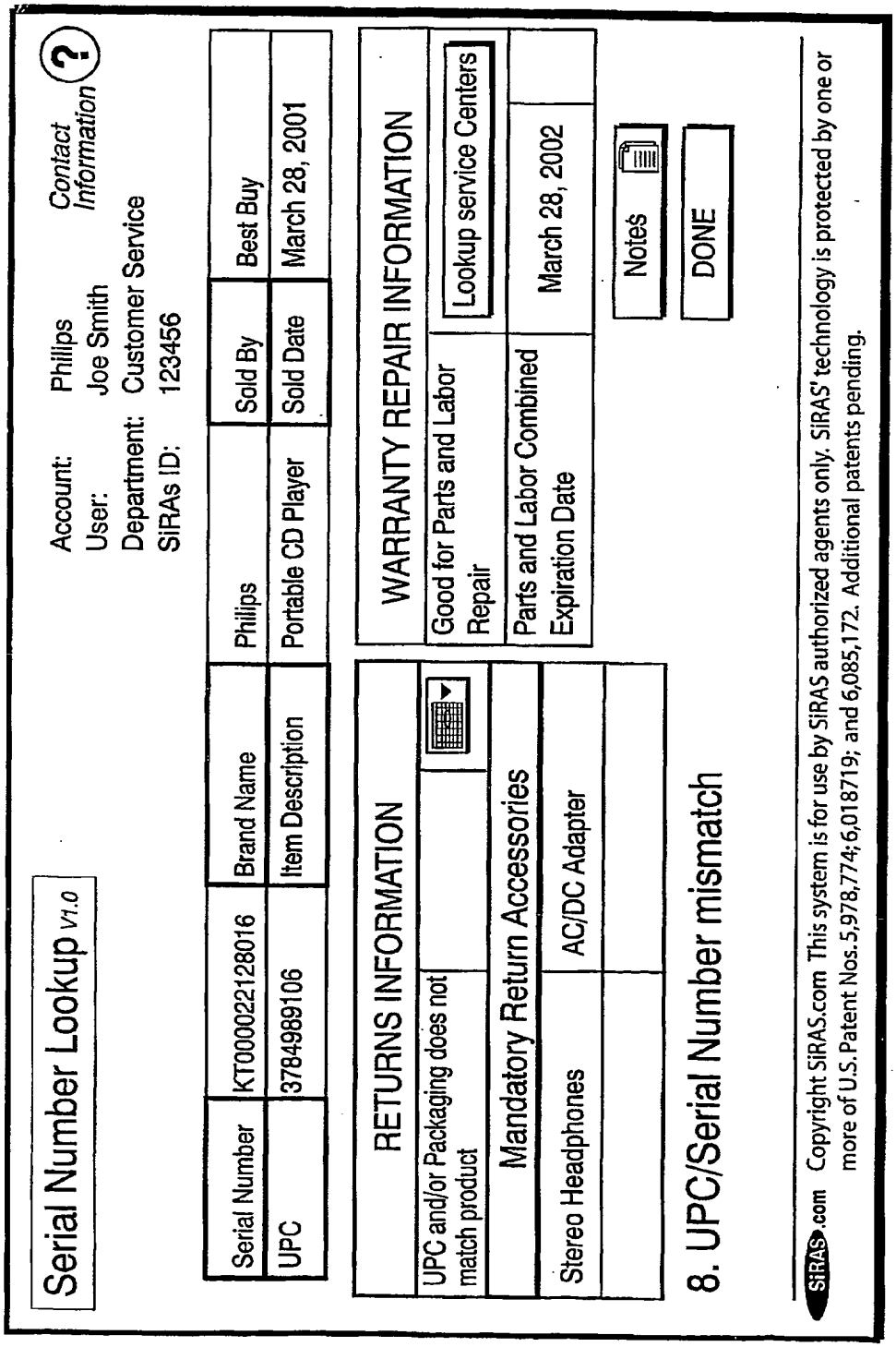


Fig. 35 UPC/Serial Number mismatch



METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR ENABLING PURCHASERS OF PRODUCTS TO OBTAIN RETURN INFORMATION AND TO INITIATE PRODUCT RETURNS VIA AN ON-LINE NETWORK CONNECTION

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

[0001] This application claims the benefit of U.S. Provisional Patent Application Serial No. 60/203,933, filed May 12, 2000, the entire content of which is herein incorporated by reference.

[0002] This application is a continuation-in-part of each of the following co-pending and commonly owned patent applications:

[0003] PCT/US99/26460 filed Nov. 10, 1999 (claiming priority on U.S. Provisional Application Serial No. 60/108,170 filed Nov. 13, 1998 and 60/119,631 filed Feb. 11, 1999);

[0004] U.S. application Ser. No. 09/065,552 filed Apr. 24, 1998 (now U.S. Pat. No. 6,085,172) (which is a continuation-in-part of U.S. application Ser. No. 08/725,259 filed Oct. 2, 1996 (now U.S. Pat. No. 6,018,719)); and

[0005] U.S. application Ser. No. 09/362,187 filed Jul. 28, 1999 (which is a continuation of U.S. application Ser. No. 08/725,259 filed Oct. 2, 1996 and 09/314,023 filed May 19, 1999 (now U.S. Pat. Nos. 6,018,719 and 5,978,774, respectively)).

[0006] Each of the above recited applications and patents are incorporated by reference herein in their entirety.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0007] 1. Field of the Invention

[0008] The present invention relates to a computer based system that provides a method for real time data storage and retrieval for the purpose of verifying and validating sales transactions and product return/warranty repair eligibility. Additionally, the present invention relates to an electronic system for registering product transactions and to a method for efficient handling of product return transactions. More particularly, the present invention relates to an electronic registration system which facilitates compliance with return policies and is useful in reducing improper or fraudulent product returns under warranty. In addition, the instant invention provides a system which enables purchasers of products, from retailers, e-tailers and the like, to access product return information through a network, such as the Internet, for the purpose of obtaining information on the return/repair of a purchased product and/or initiating a product return process via the network.

[0009] 2. Related Art

[0010] Product returns are a market reality faced by virtually every manufacturer, distributor, supplier, retailer and e-tailer (on-line retailer or "cyberstore") of commercial products. Unfortunately, handling product returns often requires a significant expenditure of resources. For example, it may be necessary to employ one or more individuals to verify that product returns satisfy the requirements of a company's return policy. This process can be complicated due to the fact that a particular retailer often carries numerous different type of products from different manufacturers, each of which often has their own return and warranty policies and procedures. As a result, the personnel responsible for processing the product return transactions at, for example, a retail store, must know or manually look-up the applicable return policies and procedures for the particular product that a person is attempting to return. This is a difficult, time-consuming, and error-prone process that often results in improper acceptance or rejection of product returns and/or warranty claims at the retail level. The problems associated with product returns have been compounded in recent years due to the large number a products that are purchased from Web sites on the Internet, i.e. from electronic retailers or e-tailers. A significant portion of the products purchased from e-tailers are returned by the purchaser. It is noted that the term "retailer" as used herein is generally meant to include e-tailers, which have now become a major supplier of products to consumers.

[0011] Once a product is accepted for return by the retailer, the retailer then typically returns the product to the manufacturer for credit. However, when the retail store accepts a product return that does not comply with the manufacturer's return policy, problems result between the retailer and the manufacturer because the manufacturer will refuse or be reluctant to accept the returned product from the retailer. Moreover, significant time and expense is wasted when a retailer improperly accepts products for return that do not comply with the manufacturer's return policy. Often times the improperly returned products are shipped to the manufacturer and then are simply returned to the retailer after being rejected for return by the manufacturer. This results in significant wasted shipping charges and employee time in attempting to resolve such matters. This situation can also result in significant tension between the retailer and the manufacturer. In other words, when returns are not properly handled at the retail level, numerous problems result for the retailer and the manufacturer.

[0012] Alternatively, a company might choose to avoid the increased overhead associated with additional employees and be somewhat less diligent about verifying compliance with the return policy prior to accepting a return. However, this alternative can increase costs due to the higher number of improper or fraudulent product returns. Either way, additional costs must either by borne by the company or passed along to the consumer.

[0013] In addition to the costs associated with verifying compliance with a return policy, even proper product returns incur additional administrative costs. Examples of such costs include shipping and handling of the returned product, repackaging and redistribution of the returned product (if appropriate), disposal of certain returned products, and the like. These costs must also be borne either by the company or by the consumer in the form of higher prices.

[0014] It is, of course, desirable to minimize costs associated with product returns to permit reduced prices to the customer and/or provide improved operating margins for the manufacturer and/or the retailer. There are two major areas in which savings may be realized: (1) reducing the number of improper or fraudulent returns; and (2) improving efficiency and reducing overhead in handling proper returns.

[0015] Manufacturers, retailers, e-tailers and other vendors of consumer products often have a standard or default return policy. For example, a retailer return policy might allow a consumer to return a purchased product for any reason within a certain number of days (e.g., 10 days) after purchase. Additionally, a manufacturer's warranty may permit return of defective products within a particular time period (e.g., 90 days) after purchase, and provide for repairs of defective products within a different time period (e.g., 180 days). Repairs of products after that date would be the responsibility of the consumer. Such return policies are intended to ensure consumer satisfaction while protecting the manufacturer and/or the retailer from improper returns. As a result, a delicate balance must be maintained between protection of the retailer or manufacturer and consumer satisfaction.

[0016] Unfortunately, it is often difficult to monitor product returns to ensure proper compliance with a return policy. For example, a consumer who received a product as a gift usually will not have a sales receipt. In such a situation, an uninformed decision must often be made to accept the return or not. If the return is not accepted, the consumer might unfairly be denied a proper return, and the retailer and the manufacturer risk suffering a loss of goodwill. On the other hand, if the return is accepted, the retailer and/or the manufacturer will incur expenses or losses which might be unwarranted. Some retailers seek to minimize the effect of possible improper returns by limiting a consumer to store credit (rather than a refund) or exchanges on items returned without a receipt. This alternative, however, may be unacceptable to a consumer and does not completely eliminate the retailers' exposure to improper returns.

[0017] Difficulties associated with returns made without a receipt stem primarily from the inability of the retailer to obtain purchase information (such as sales date, place of purchase, etc.) concerning the individual item for which a return is sought. Without such information, it is usually impossible for the retailer to determine whether the return is in compliance with the return policy.

[0018] In addition to the foregoing, fraudulent returns can cost product retailers and manufacturers significant sums of money. As an example, upon release of the Super Nintendo Entertainment System (Super NES), Nintendo experienced a high volume of returns of basic NES hardware. When the returned products were evaluated, it was discovered that a high percentage of the products were not defective and, in fact, were several years old. Thus, customers were abusing the retailer's return policy to exchange old products and upgrade to the new system. Such abuses increase costs to the retailers and manufacturers. These costs are often passed on to purchasers without any attendant benefit to legitimate consumers.

[0019] While companies generally try to prevent fraudulent returns, the personnel responsible for processing such returns do not have the suitable resources and/or information needed to assure that only proper returns are accepted. This problem is compounded when the consumer does not have a receipt because it has been lost or because the product was received as a gift from another person. While many of these situations represent legitimate return requests, a significant percentage of such return requests are fraudulently made by consumers. Unscrupulous consumers have in recent years become increasingly creative in their attempts to return merchandise which does not in fact qualify for return under the purchase agreement. For example, a customer may purchase a product at a reduced price at one store and then attempt to return the product to another store for a profit. Customers have also been known to purchase a new product and then return an older or defective product (which no longer qualifies for return or warranty repair) in the new product packaging, thereby obtaining the new product at no cost. Under current practice, retailers are at a significant disadvantage in connection with product return requests, because they typically do not know whether a product has been purchased from their store or another store, or even how much was originally paid for the product even if the product was purchased at its store. Return audits have shown that a significant number of consumers use this disadvantage to their personal benefit and at the cost of the retailer and manufacturer.

[0020] The problems associated with product returns are compounded when the product has been purchased on-line from an e-tailer. In this situation, the e-tailer must make decisions about the acceptance or rejection of a return and request little information about the specific product sought to be returned or the particular individual attempting to return the product. The handling of product returns for on-line purchasers can be quite time consuming and costly. Moreover, due to inadequate control mechanisms, many improper returns are accepted by e-tailers. In addition, there are high costs associated with handling proper and improper product returns originating from on-line purchasers.

[0021] In the past several years, retailers and the industry have shown renewed interest in curbing the volume of unwarranted and fraudulent product returns. This interest is largely due to diminishing profit margins and the competitive nature of the retailing business. Because of thin profit margins, retailers and manufacturers can no longer absorb the cost of unjustified product returns. Unless product returns are significantly reduced, retailers and/or manufacturers will have little choice but to pass these costs on to the consumer in the form of price increases.

[0022] Prompt and efficient handling of returns and proper enforcement of return policies helps to keep down costs while maintaining consumer confidence and satisfaction. However, efforts to speed handling or improve enforcement lose their value if the expense of those efforts outweighs the accompanying benefit. Accordingly, such efforts must be efficient to benefit the manufacturers, retailer, e-tailer and the consumer.

[0023] Another problem confronted by retailers stems from the fact that different manufacturers may have different return policies. For example, one manufacturer may require returns to take place within 90 days of the original purchase, whereas others may permit returns up to 120 days or 180 days after the original purchase. Similarly, some manufacturers may have strict limitations on product returns without original packaging or returns of products wherein relatively minor parts (e.g., instruction manuals, connecting cables, etc.) are missing. Because of the variety of manufacturer return policies, it is often difficult for a retailer to ensure proper compliance. As a practical matter, it may be extremely difficult or even impossible to educate the retailer or e-tailer staff with regard to each return policy. This

problem is compounded by the fact that manufacturers and/or retailers may have returns policies that vary between products. Moreover, a retailer often carries products for many different manufacturers. Manufacturers or retailers may also have special return or warranty policies for products which are sold at reduced prices, for example. Some manufacturers may also only allow returns that are within a specified period of time starting from the date of shipment to the retailer, rather than from the date the product is purchased by a consumer. In fact, in today's market it is not uncommon for a single manufacturer or retailer to have numerous different return and/or warranty policies that apply depending on the particular product and the particular conditions under which the product was purchased.

[0024] Thus, retailers and e-tailers may be placed in a position where improper returns are inadvertently accepted or where proper returns are rejected. Accepting improper returns increases costs which must either be absorbed or passed on to customers in the form of higher prices or restocking fees, for example. Of course, rejecting proper returns may damage goodwill between the vendor and the customer.

[0025] There are also costs in terms of time, expense and inconvenience which are incurred by the purchaser or consumer in connection with product returns. For example, consumers often must take the product back to a retail location to return the product and obtain credit therefore. However, in many instances the consumer does not even know if the product will be accepted for return prior to taking the product back to the store. As a result, consumers often waste significant time and expense in returning a product to a store simply to find out that the store will not accept the product for return as a result of, for example, the applicable warranty period having expired. Such situations also cause significant inconvenience and annoyance for the consumer and the retailer which can harm the reputation of the retailer in the eyes of its potential customers.

[0026] Accordingly, there is a need for a system which facilitates authorized product returns for a number of different manufacturers and/or products while also reducing the incidence of unauthorized returns. Additionally, there is a need for a product purchase registration system which minimizes costs associated with returns, improves retailer and e-tailer efficiency in handling product returns, increases overall customer satisfaction, and provides retailers and consumers with immediate access to purchase data information for products of various manufacturers. Further, there is a need to simplify and streamline the return process for consumers, retailers, e-tailers and manufacturers, as well as any third party service provider associated therewith.

[0027] It is a primary object of the present invention to satisfy these needs. A further object of the present invention is to enable retailers to more efficiently and effectively enforce applicable product return/warranty policies, even in situations in which the person seeking the return no longer has the sales receipt. Another object of the invention to reduce fraudulent product returns, and to protect the retailer and manufacturer from the cost and inconvenience associated therewith. A further object of the invention is to provide a method and system available at the return location, such as a retail store check-out counter or customer service counter, which is operable to quickly and accurately verify whether the particular product sought to be returned does or does not qualify for return under the applicable return criteria for that particular product, prior to accepting the product for return. Another object of the invention is to provide the customer with useful information regarding the product even if the product does not qualify for return, thereby improving customer satisfaction even when returns are not accepted. Yet another object of the invention is to reduce the need to return products by providing technical information regarding set-up or operation of the product to the consumer for the purpose of solving a problem the consumer is having with the product, thereby reducing the need to return products. Still another object of the invention is to provide the store personnel with information on the particular product being returned, which information enables verification of whether or not the product being returned includes all of the original parts or components prior to accepting the product for return. Yet another object of the invention is to provide a system which enables the consumer to directly access product purchase and return information for products they have purchased and to electronically initiate the return process from a convenient location, such as their home, via an on-line network connection.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0028] The present invention achieves these and other objects by providing an electronic registration and verification system which uses individual product identification information for purchased products, gathered, for example, at the point of a sales transaction or during the fulfillment of an on-line purchase from an e-tailer, and storing the information in one or more transaction databases. In an example embodiment of the present invention, individual product identification information (such as a unique serial number) is stored in a local transaction database along with additional information including at least the date of the transaction. A transaction receipt such as a customer sales receipt may be created and includes at least the unique product identification information and the date of the transaction. Additionally, the individual product identification information and the transaction date may be communicated to a separate location for inclusion in a general transaction database. The local transaction database may include, for example, sales made by a particular store or sales made by several affiliated stores and is not necessarily co-located with the point of sale or the e-tailer. The local transaction database may also organize the data by individual manufacturer for ease of access.

[0029] The instant invention enables a store clerk or the like to obtain real-time electronic verification of a particular product sale transaction as well as the currently available return/warranty options for a particular product presented for return.

[0030] In accordance with an important aspect of the invention, the invention also enables the consumer or the purchaser of the product to access the stored information, via a Web site or the like, to obtain information about a return of the product and/or to initiate a return procedure. The initiation of the return procedure may include, for example, providing the consumer with a return authorization and return instructions upon request and upon verifying that the return meets the applicable return criteria. The consumer can then use the return authorization (RA) and the return instruc-

tions to send the product back to the appropriate location (which may be, for example, the retailer, e-tailer, manufacturer or third party service provider). If the product does not qualify for return, the invention enables the consumer to obtain other useful information regarding the product via the Web site, such as operating or hook-up instructions for the product, as well as information on locations for warranty or non-warranty service for the product. In other words, the invention enables the consumer to directly access the transaction information and determine if the product qualifies for return simply by accessing a Web site or other similar on-line service, or by using an automated 800 (toll-free) telephone number or the like. In addition, if the product qualifies for return, the consumer is automatically provided with a pre-return authorization and instructions for completing the return process. This enables the consumer to return the product with little or no front-end involvement by the retailer, e-tailer or manufacturer.

[0031] Prior to obtaining individual product identification information, the electronic registration system may identify the type of product by evaluating, for example, the product SKU number derived from a universal product code (UPC). In this example, the individual product identification information is obtained only if the product is of a type for which electronic registration is desired. If the product is not of a type where electronic registration is desired, the product is not registered (i.e. a non-serialized purchase). In this case, the instant invention can still be used to help automate and streamline the return process for such non-serialized items. For example, the system may provide the consumer with information on return or repair of the non-serialized product via the same Web site used to handle consumer returns for serialized products (i.e. products that have been registered using the serial number or other unique identifier).

[0032] The transaction information including the individual product identification information and the transaction date may be communicated for use in a general database in a number of different ways. For instance, an electronic link to the location of the general database may be established or information may be recorded and physically transferred to that location. The communications may occur periodically, on an item-by-item basis, or otherwise.

[0033] In a physical retail store environment, when a customer returns a product with a receipt to the retail location, a retailer may look at the serial number on the receipt and compare it to the returned product. If the serial numbers match and if all other return conditions for the particular product are met, the return may be accepted. When a customer returns a product with no receipt, or a receipt that does not have a correct serial number, the retailer may search the local database for sale information concerning the specific item being returned. If no sale information is located (for instance if another retailer sold the product), the general database may be accessed and searched for sales information, and the return handled accordingly. Additionally, if the retail clerk is unfamiliar with the applicable return policy, the clerk may submit the product for return approval to obtain the necessary information on the product and make an appropriate determination as to whether the return should be accepted. If the product does not qualify for return, the invention enables the sales clerk to provide other useful information or assistance to the person seeking the return, such as operating or hook-up instructions for the product, as well as information on locations for warranty or non-warranty service for the product.

[0034] In accordance with yet another aspect of the present invention, a computer system at a product return center location obtains identifying information for a product which is to be returned from a retailer to a manufacturer. In the disclosed example implementation, this identifying information is then submitted to a remote return approval computer system through the internet or the like. The return approval computer system may then utilize the identifying information to determine whether the returned product satisfies applicable return criteria. If so, the product is pre-approved for return. The product return location preferably obtains identifying information for a plurality of returned products at a time. In response to the product identifying information submitted by the product return location, the return approval location may provide a list of approved returns and unapproved returns, along with a return authorization number for a batch of approved returns. The product return location may then assemble the approved product returns and ship the batch to the return approval location (such as the manufacturer). Shipping costs can be saved by omitting rejected product returns from the shipment. The return approval location can handle the approved product returns from the regional return center as a batch, thereby reducing costs.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THEE DRAWINGS

[0035] Other objects, features, advantages and characteristics of the present invention will become apparent from the following detailed description of exemplary embodiments, when read in view of the accompanying drawings, in which:

[0036] **FIG. 1** is a schematic block diagram illustrating an example of an overall electronic registration system which may be used in connection with one aspect of the present invention;

[0037] **FIG. 2** is an example flowchart illustrating a series of exemplary steps that may be performed at a point of sale for registering a product transaction;

[0038] **FIG. 3** illustrates an example transaction receipt which reflects a unique product serial number and a transaction date;

[0039] **FIG. 4** illustrates an example flow chart for an electronic data interface between a product retailer and a registration center during electronic product registration;

[0040] **FIGS. 5A and 5B** illustrate an example flow chart generally illustrating steps which may be taken in connection with product registration and return;

[0041] **FIG. 6** illustrates an example of a procedure at a retailer for determining whether a product return is properly under warranty;

[0042] **FIG. 7** schematically illustrates a typical arrangement which may be utilized in handling product returns;

[0043] **FIG. 8** is a schematic diagram illustrating components which may be used in connection with a preferred example implementation of one aspect of the present invention;

[0044] **FIG. 9** is a data flow diagram illustrating operation of the system of **FIG. 8**;

[0045] **FIGS. 10A through 10H** illustrate various user interface screen displays which may be used in connection with an example implementation of one aspect of the present invention;

[0046] **FIG. 11** is a plan view of a pallet on which a plurality of returned goods is stacked for return to a manufacturer, including a batch return authorization label which may be placed on the pallet;

[0047] **FIG. 11A** further illustrates the batch return authorization label of **FIG. 11**;

[0048] **FIGS. 12, 12A** and **12B** are schematic diagrams illustrating the operation of a general registration/return system in accordance with one aspect of the present invention;

[0049] **FIG. 13** is a schematic diagram further illustrating the operation of the system of **FIG. 12**;

[0050] **FIG. 14** is an application overview illustrating various components and functions of a preferred implementation of the central registration computer system;

[0051] **FIG. 15** is a flow chart illustrating steps that may be taken to ensure customer protection and verification during submission of additional product registration information as part of a consumer post-sale product registration;

[0052] **FIGS. 16A through 16G** are example user interface screen displays which may be used during a customer service request for return/warranty information;

[0053] **FIGS. 17A through 17H** are example user interface screen displays which may be used during a customer service request for operating instructions or hook-up information for a product;

[0054] **FIGS. 18A through 18F** are example user interface screen displays which may be used during a customer service request for vendor/product information;

[0055] **FIG. 19** is an overview of the main components of the Web site embodiment of the invention, wherein the customer accesses the transaction information and obtains a return authorization;

[0056] **FIG. 20** shows an exemplary initial screen on the Web site of **FIG. 19**, wherein the customer indicates whether the product sought to be returned is serialized or non-serialized; and

[0057] FIGS. **21-35** shows additional exemplary screens of the Web site of **FIG. 19**.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

[0058] The present invention is described in the context of particular exemplary embodiments. However, it will be recognized by those of ordinary skill that modification, extensions and changes to the disclosed exemplary embodiments may be made without departing from the true scope and spirit of the instant invention. In short, the following descriptions are provided by way of example only, and the present invention is not limited to the particular preferred embodiments disclosed herein.

[0059] An example of one type of electronic product registration system that is preferably used in connection with the instant invention is illustrated in **FIG. 1**. This exemplary electronic registration system is the subject of the two commonly owned patents identified above (U.S. Pat. Nos. 6,018,719 and 5,978,774). Briefly, this example system includes a point of sale register **2** and an associated bar code scanner **4**. The register **2** is preferably connected with a local computer system **6** in any suitable manner. For example, the register **2** may be "hard-wired" to the local computer system **6**. Alternatively, the register **2** and the local computer system **6** may communicate, for example, through modems and telephone lines, or over radio communication channels. Any suitable communication channel may be used.

[0060] In certain situations (e.g., single store retailers), it may be advantageous to have the local computer system **6** located in proximity to the register **2**. For large chain stores, however, it may be advantageous to situate the local retailer computer **6** at a central location with links to the registers **2** at individual stores. The particular arrangement will depend on the preferences and circumstances of the specific retailer and may vary in accordance therewith.

[0061] The local retailer computer system includes an associated local database **8** for storing registration information. Additionally, a local printer **10** and an operator terminal **11** may be provided. The operator terminal may be used, for example, by a store clerk upon return of merchandise to locate pertinent sales information in the local database **8**. The printer **10** may be used to produce hard copies of, for example, end-of-day sales reports and/or the like.

[0062] In the exemplary embodiment, a communication channel **12** is provided between the retailer computer system **6** and a central computer system **14**. The central registration computer system may, for example, be an independent registration center computer system which electronically registers product transactions for a number of different retailers. In other words, the central computer system may be operated by a third-party service provider.

[0063] It is noted that the term "communication channel" or "channel" is used herein in its broadest sense, and includes any suitable technique for passing electronic information between systems. Such suitable techniques include, for example, electronic links via modem, radio links, or even communications established by physically transporting a recording medium, such as a magnetic disk, magnetic tape or optical disk, from one system to the other. In the preferred arrangement, an electronic link may be established by modem over available commercial telephone lines.

[0064] A general registration database **16** is associated with the central registration computer system **14** for storing transaction information from a plurality of retailer computer systems **6**. Additionally, a printer **18** and an operator terminal **20** may be included with the central registration computer system **14**. As discussed below in greater detail, the central registration computer system may maintain a number of data files pertaining to individual retailers, e-tailers, manufacturers and the like. These data files include information applicable to the particular individual retailer, e-tailer, distributor, manufacturer or the like and are preferably maintained by that particular individual or entity. For example, a data file may contain specific return/warranty policy information applicable to that particular individual or entity.

[0065] It should be appreciated that the central computer system **14** is preferably intended to handle product registra-

tions for a number of different manufacturers and/or other vendors. Accordingly, the general registration database may employ a structure wherein the product registrations for each participating vendor is maintained in separate areas. Alternatively, separate databases may be employed for each participating vendor. Of course, other data structures may be employed so long as the registration center is able to properly keep track of the product transaction information.

[0066] As illustrated in **FIG. 1**, the central registration computer system **14** may have a number of additional communications links **12'**, **12"**, etc. for receiving information from other local computer systems. Thus, for example, a registration center may receive information from a number of different retailers. Additionally, the local computer system **6** may include a number of additional communication channels **13**, **13'**, **13"**, etc. for connecting with other central computer systems. Accordingly, an individual retailer can electronically register products with a number of different registration databases, if desired. Furthermore, a number of communication channels **15**, **15'**, **15"**, etc. can be provided for communications between the central registration computer system **14** and individual manufacturer computer systems and computer systems of third party service providers, law enforcement agencies and/or the like. Of course, a general access channel such as an internet connection may also be made available for authorized access to the central computer system **14**.

[0067] For convenience, the multiple communication channels in **FIG. 1** are illustrated with separate lines. It should be noted, however, that separate lines are not necessary. For example, the local computer system **6** more likely would have a single communications line, and connection with the particular central computer system **14** would be made through a modem by dialing the appropriate telephone number or through an internet connection.

[0068] In the e-tailer environment, the information on the product and transaction (e.g. serial number) may be collected at any suitable point during fulfillment of the on-line purchase, and the transaction information may be communicated to a local and/or central database by any suitable method, such as by an internet connection to the database.

[0069] An example of the operation of the system illustrated in **FIG. 1** is now described in connection with FIGS. **2-6**. Referring now to **FIG. 2**, the electronic registration process begins, in this exemplary physical retailer embodiment, when a customer brings merchandise to the register **2** for check-out. The sales clerk enters the SKU number which identifies the type of product involved in the transaction (e.g., Super Nintendo Entertainment System, Nintendo Game Boy, Nintendo N64, etc.) by, for example, scanning a UPC product code included on the product packaging (block **100**). Of course, key entry or another technique for entering the SKU number, such as reading of an RF-ID tag on the product, may be used.

[0070] Electronic registration might not be necessary or desired for a substantial number of small commodity products (e.g., batteries, candy, diapers, etc.) that are commonly sold by retailers. Accordingly, a check may be made, based on the type of product as identified by the UPC code, to determine whether this is a product for which electronic registration is desired (block **102**). If so, the store associate is prompted to enter the serial number of the individual item (block **104**).

[0071] The serial number may be entered (block **106**), for example, by scanning a serial number printed on the packaging. Alternatively, the serial number as it appears on the product may be scanned through a window in the packaging. This alternative ensures that the individual product is identified even if it is mispackaged. Also, repackaging of returned merchandise would be simplified. Other techniques, such as key entry or RF-ID tag reading, may also be used. Because the serial number is unique to each individual product, it acts as individual production identification information.

[0072] Once the serial number is entered, a check may be made to ensure that the serial number is valid (block **108**). If not, control returns to block **104**, and the store associate is again prompted to enter the serial number. This is repeated until a valid serial number is obtained. It may be desirable to provide store managers with the ability to override the requirement to enter a serial number in a limited number of situations. If such an ability is given, however, the overrides should be monitored to ensure the ability is not abused. This may be done, for example, by generating a periodic report listing all overrides by individual managers.

[0073] Several different techniques may be used to evaluate and verify the validity of the serial number. Of course, to safeguard against fraud, individual manufacturers will likely each use its own confidential technique for verifying the validity of the serial number. Accordingly, the retailer system preferably includes the ability to select and apply an appropriate verification technique in accordance with the particular manufacturer, product line, or the like. In one preferred technique, a check digit is added to the serial number. Such a check digit technique may utilize a predetermined mathematical operation which is performed on the digits of the serial number. If the result of the predetermined mathematical operation is equal to the check digit, the validity of the serial number is verified. An example of a preferred check digit technique that can be used in connection with the instant invention is provided in the above-referenced PCT application

[0074] This feature of the instant invention provides an advantageous method of enabling participating manufacturers to assign a serial number mask for each UPC, while also enabling the serial numbers used to be easily captured during a product transaction for input to an electronic registration system (ERS) or the like. The POS system would then have access to information which would enable it to know what mask to use for each UPC, thereby enabling the correct serial number to be obtained and verified during the product purchase transaction, whether originating from retailers or e-tailers.

[0075] In accordance with another aspect of the invention, the mask may be defined in a manner which enables the system (ERS system, POS system, or other related system) to determine if the mask is a packaging mask or a product mask. A packaging mask is defined as a mask for serial numbers used only on packaging for products, while a product mask is defined as a mask for serial numbers used only on actual products. One example embodiment of this feature of the invention is to define certain elements (such as certain constants) in the mask to be used only with serial numbers on product packaging, and to define different constants for use only with serial numbers on actual prod-

ucts. In this manner, the POS or ERS system could determine upon reading the serial number whether the actual product or only the product packaging has been scanned or otherwise obtained.

[0076] One benefit of this optional feature of the invention, is that fraudulent returns can be minimized or prevented. More particularly, by using this technique the fraudulent return situation can be avoided where a person purchases a new product with new packaging and then returns the new packaging with an old or different product therein for credit or refund. The invention reduces this type of fraud by requiring that an actual product be scanned, rather than only the packaging returned with the product. In other words the POS or ERS system could be programmed to recognize during a product return transaction whether only the packaging serial number has been scanned, and prevent acceptance of the return until the actual product is scanned, thereby assuring that the actual product, not just the packaging, qualifies for return.

[0077] Once the serial number is verified (block **108**), a local database may be updated with the serial number information and any other necessary or desired information (block **110**). At minimum, however, the local database should include an indication of the date on which the transaction took place. Other information might include the price paid, the store associate responsible for the sale, and the like.

[0078] The serial number of the individual product is printed (block **112**) as part of a written customer transaction receipt when in the retailer environment. As shown in the sample sales receipt **30** of **FIG. 3**, the serial number may be printed adjacent the description and SKU number of the registered product. Thus, it will be a simple matter to correlate serial numbers with associated products, particularly when several registered products appear on a single customer sales receipt. Of course, additional information may be printed as well.

[0079] The date of the transaction will typically be printed at either the beginning or the end of the sales receipt, but may appear anywhere on the receipt. In the example operation illustrated in **FIG. 2** and the sample sales receipt of **FIG. 3**, the date is printed at the end of the sales receipt **30** (block **116**). For ease of viewing, the serial number and date on the sample receipt **30** are indicated by boxes. If desired, an actual printed receipt may also have such information highlighted, for example, by a different color ink.

[0080] Turning back to the example operation illustrated in **FIG. 2**, after the serial number is printed, a check is made to determine whether sales are complete (block **114**). Ordinarily, this will be based on the store associate hitting a TOTAL button on the cash register. If sales are not complete, control returns to block **100** for entry of a SKU number for the next product. Otherwise, sales totals are calculated and printed on the receipt along with the current date (block **116**). Thereafter, the central registration computer system **14** is contacted and the general registration database **16** is updated.

[0081] It should be emphasized that the operation illustrated in **FIG. 2** is merely exemplary, and that the steps need not be performed in the particular order shown. For example, all print operations and database updates can take place after sales are completed. Additionally, it is not necessary to update the databases on an item-by-item basis. Indeed, efficiency and speed in updating the general database may be increased by batching transactions in groups of, for example, fifteen transactions.

[0082] An example technique for interfacing the local computer system **6** to the central registration computer system **14** is illustrated in **FIG. 4**. Product serial numbers are scanned or keyed in by a store associate (block **200**) and stored with associated information in the local database (block **202**) using an operation such as discussed in connection with **FIG. 2**. Thereafter, the local computer system **6** extracts the serial number information from the database (block **204**) and batches the information in blocks of fifteen (block **206**). The information may also be batched by manufacturer in the local computer system **6**. The operations represented by blocks **204** and **206** are preferably performed periodically, for example, daily.

[0083] Once the serial number information is properly batched (block **206**), the local computer system **6**, in this case a retailer system, dials the general registration computer system **14**, to make an electronic link to an electronic mailbox set up for that particular retailer (block **208**). A separate electronic mailbox may be set up for each registration center account. The connection is tested (block **210**) and, if the connection is not properly established, the retailer computer system **6** redials (block **212**) until a proper connection is established. At that point, data is transmitted (block **214**) to the electronic mailbox. Batching the information increases transmission speed and, therefore, reduces data transmission times.

[0084] Data communications between the retailer or e-tailer system and the registration center system may use a conventional communications format. For example, the computer systems may be equipped with an EDI Translator capable of using the Standard 140 file format established by the EIA. The Standard 140 file format is specifically designed to extract product registration information. A typical transmission would begin with a Transaction Set Header to indicate the start of a transaction and to assign a control number. This would be followed by a Beginning Segment for Product Registration which indicates the beginning of a product registration transaction set and transmits identifying numbers, dates and times. The identifying numbers may include a Purpose Code to identify the type of registration (e.g., original sale or return to stock) and a Reference Number assigned by the user for the particular transaction. Next, a Name segment is transmitted to identify the user by type of organization, name and identifier code. The identifier code may indicate an organizational entity, a physical location, or an individual.

[0085] If desired, additional identifying segments such as an Address Information segment and a Geographic Location segment may be transmitted. The address information would include, for example, a street number and name for the individual store. The geographic location information would include the city name, a state or province code as defined by an appropriate Government agency, a postal code (e.g., a zip code in the United States), and a country code.

[0086] Following any desired additional identifying segments, specific item identification information (e.g., serial numbers) may be transmitted along with a textual descrip-

tion of the product if desired. Information identifying the individual store or e-tailer that sold the particular item may be associated with the information for that item. Appropriate dividers would be provided to separate the information for the respective individual items. After the individual item information has been transmitted completely, a Transaction Set Trailer segment may be transmitted to indicate the end of the transaction set and provide the count of transmitted segments.

[0087] Returning now to **FIG. 4**, the registration center computer system **14** decodes the serial number information received from the retailer or e-tailer (block **216**). The decoded serial number information is preferably sorted by manufacturer (if not already sorted) and initially stored in a temporary database (block **218**). Separate temporary databases may be employed for individual manufacturers. The serial number information is preferably encoded along with the retailer's name, the registration date, the sale date, the last date on which returns will be accepted, and the last date for warranty repairs (block **220**).

[0088] The applicable return and warranty dates may be stored in the registration center computer system or, alternatively, could be obtained from the particular manufacturer by way of communication channels **15**, **15'**, **15"**, etc. Of course, other ways of determining the appropriate dates may also be utilized. In accordance with the preferred embodiment, however, the central computer system has access to information providing the manufacturer's return and warranty policy for each product registered, and the participating manufacturer or other vender provides and updates this information for each of its products.

[0089] The individual serial numbers may next be validated using the check digit technique discussed above, and the data is transferred to the registration center's general database (block **222**). Following validation of the serial numbers, an on-line summary report may be generated which lists all accepted and rejected serial numbers (block **224**). The valid data is then stored in the manufacturer's national serial number database for later access as described in detail below.

[0090] The summary report provided in block **224** provides a tool for the registration center to locate trouble spots caused, for instance, by malfunctioning retailer systems or attempted fraud. Additional monitoring reports may also be generated as desired. For example, the serial number pass/fail ratio for all returns by a particular retailer over a given time period may be reported, duplicate serial numbers may be located and listed, previously registered serial numbers may be flagged, and cross-references may be made between the registration date and the date the product was returned to the manufacturer. Such reports can be used by the registration center to monitor retailer returns for possible problems or abuse. Reports may also be generated for individual manufacturers for separate monitoring or other uses.

[0091] **FIGS. 5A and 5B** illustrate in flow chart form an example purchase and return process made possible by the electronic registration system (ERS) described above in accordance with the present invention. A store customer first picks out a store product for purchase (block **300**) and brings it to the check out station (block **302**). The store associate then scans the UPC code to enter the product SKU number (block **304**) and, if it is a product for which electronic registration is sought, the store clerk is prompted to enter the unique serial number (block **306**).

[0092] After the store clerk scans the serial number (block **308**), the customer sales receipt is printed with the serial number (block **310**) and the transaction databases are updated (block **312**). The process ends if the customer is satisfied with the product (block **314**). If not, however, the customer returns the product to the store (block **316**).

[0093] As noted previously, if the customer presents the sales receipt at the time of a return, the store associate may compare the serial number on the product with that on the sales receipt. The associate should compare the printed serial number with that on the product itself, rather than the serial number on the packaging, to guard against repackaging of an old product in a box for a recently purchased product. If the serial numbers match, the return is within an applicable allowable time period, and all other return qualifications are met (e.g., no major parts are missing, etc.) the return may be accepted, assuming that the store clerk handling the return is aware of the applicable return policy associated with that particular product.

[0094] However, if the store clerk is uncertain of the applicable allowable return period, the clerk may submit the product for electronic return verification as described below.

[0095] If there is no receipt, or if the product serial number does not match that printed on the receipt, the store associate examines the products to ensure all return qualifications are met (block **318**). If so, the store associate scans the serial number on the product (block **320**) and the retailer computer system **6** checks the retailer database for the serial number (block **322**). A link to the registration center's serial number database may be made to search for serial numbers which do not appear in the retailer database (block **324**).

[0096] Assuming the serial number information is found in either the retailer database or the registration center database, the date of purchase is checked to see if then return has been presented within the applicable return period (e.g., 90 days) (block **326**). Purchases within the applicable return period which meet all other manufacturer return qualifications (block **328**) may be refunded or exchanged (block **330**). The retailer may then return the product to the manufacturer within an applicable time period (e.g., 150 days) from the date of purchase to receive credit for the return (block **332**).

[0097] For products which do not meet all manufacturer return qualifications (block **328**), but were purchased within the applicable return period (block **326**), the consumer may be referred to an authorized repair facility for a warranty repair (block **334**). Similarly, if the purchase was made outside the applicable return period (block **326**), but within the applicable warranty repair period (e.g., 180 days) (block **336**), the customer will be referred to an authorized repair facility for a warranty repair (block **334**). Consumers seeking to return products purchased beyond the applicable warranty repair period (block **336**) will be directed to an authorized repair facility for a non-warranty repair (block **338**).

[0098] The example return and warranty repair deadlines noted in the example of **FIG. 5** are fairly typical for actual return policies. However, these particular deadlines are merely examples, and other appropriate deadlines may be

used without departing from the invention. Because different manufactures may utilize different return and warranty deadlines, it is preferred that the deadlines applicable to a particular manufacturer be stored in the retailer computer system. Of course, if the applicable deadlines are encoded along with the serial number information at the time of initial registration, that information should be available from the registration data without the need to again check the applicable return criteria.

[0099] **FIG. 6** provides a graphic illustration of a return process which utilizes the features of an electronic registration system in accordance with the instant invention. As illustrated at the left hand portion of **FIG. 6**, when a customer seeks to return a product, the store associate searches the retailer's store-wide database by entering the product serial number. If the transaction is located in the store-wide database, the operator terminal **11** of the retailer computer system **6** displays the product description, the purchase location, and purchase date. Additionally, the consumer's return options for the particular manufacturer (e.g., warranty repair, exchange, store credit, or cash refund) may be displayed. The display of consumer options is particularly advantageous where electronic registration is used for multiple manufacturers. By displaying the options, the need for the store clerk to remember or look up the options is avoided. Also, the likelihood of the store associate making a mistake is reduced.

[0100] The right hand portion of **FIG. 6** illustrates a situation where the product was purchased from a competitor retailer and, thus, does not appear in the store-wide database. After unsuccessfully searching the store-wide database, the retailer computer system **6** dials up to search the registration center database. The registration center computer system **14** returns the date purchased, the name of the retailer that sold the product, the applicable deadline for consumer returns, the applicable deadline for the retailer to return the product to the manufacturer for credit, and the applicable deadline for warranty repairs. Based on this information from the registration center, the operator terminal **11** of the retailer computer system **6** displays the product description, the purchase location and date, and available consumer options.

[0101] Referring now to **FIG. 7**, an example of a typical arrangement which may be used for handling product returns is illustrated. The present invention, of course, is applicable to other arrangements as well. In the example arrangement of **FIG. 7, a** regional warehouse **501** operated by a large retail chain collects product returns from local retail stores **503A** and **503B**. In the illustrated example, retail store **503A** is located in the Northeast United States and retail store **503B** serves the Mid-Atlantic region; the retailer regional return center warehouse **501** is located in the South; and the manufacturer warehouse **505** is in the Pacific Northwest. Of course, this example is for illustrative purposes only, and it should be appreciated that other local retail stores, regional return centers, etc. would be present in an actual return network. Also, it should be understood that a product return network typically would be operated in conjunction with a product distribution network.

[0102] After the returned products arrive at the regional warehouse **501**, they are sorted by manufacturer and/or product, and are shipped from the regional warehouse **501** to the manufacturer warehouse **505** for credit or replacement. The manufacturer then inspects the returned products to ensure that they comply with necessary return conditions and, if appropriate, issues a credit or replacement product.

[0103] Each step of the foregoing example return process involves various processing and handling requirements. For example, personnel at the local retail store must first review the product for compliance with applicable return requirements (e.g., ensure that the product is returned within the specified return period and verify that all parts have been returned), and then arrange for shipment to the appropriate regional warehouse by way of a truck **507** or other suitable means of transportation.

[0104] Employees at the regional warehouse must unload the products received from the local retail stores, sort them by manufacturer and/or product, prepare them for shipment (e.g., place the returned products on shipping pallets), and arrange for the shipment to the manufacturer. Finally, the manufacturer must receive the returned product shipment, verify that the returns are proper, repackage the returned products if appropriate, and conduct necessary bookkeeping to ensure that the retailer receives proper credit for the return. It is noted that the foregoing is not an exhaustive list of the costs and efforts associated with processing product returns by the retail stores, the regional return center warehouses, and the manufacturers.

[0105] The electronic registration system (ERS) described above may be utilized, for example, in connection with operations at the retailer regional return center warehouse **501** to reduce costs incurred by both the return center and the manufacturer. In accordance with one aspect of the present invention, significant cost savings can be realized by reducing or eliminating unnecessary shipping costs by making a relatively early determination whether a product return will ultimately be accepted by the manufacturer or the like. If not, the returned product need not be handled further, thereby reducing costs.

[0106] Thus, ERS can be used to reduce costs and improve efficiency of returns between the retailer and manufacturer and also, as described in greater detail below, between the consumer and the retailer and/or the manufacturer. As explained herein, the user interface as well as the operation of the ERS system is significantly different in the retail/manufacturer application as compared to the consumer/retailer application, as a result of the particular needs in each of these return situations. It is noted that commonly owned and co-pending application Ser. No. 09/065,552 identified above, includes, as one example, a method and apparatus for efficiently handling product return transactions between a retailer and a manufacturer. In order to provide a complete understanding of the preferred ERS system used in the present invention, a further description of this retailer/manufacturer returns system is described below.

[0107] In accordance with this feature of the ERS system, advance return authorization (RA) for shipment of returned products between the retailer and the manufacturer can be obtained for a plurality of products at one time to establish an approved product return batch. The approved batch may be properly labeled prior to return to the manufacturer. In this way, product returns may be easily and efficiently handled in batches rather than as individual units, thereby improving efficiency and reducing costs.

[0108] Referring now to **FIG. 8**, an example implementation of this system includes a return side portion **521** and a manufacturer side portion **523** which are operable to communicate over, for example, an internet connection **525**. Briefly, the return side portion **521** may include a personal computer **5210** that includes, for example, an Intel 486 processor or higher with at least 16 MB of RAM, a Microsoft Windows 95 or Windows NT operating system, and browser software such as Netscape Navigator 4.0 or higher. The personal computer **5210** may also include a modem for direct connection to an internet provider through a dedicated telephone connection **5212**. Alternatively, an internet connection may be made by the personal computer **5210** over a corporate network. Also, it may be possible to utilize a direct telephone link by modem between the return side portion **521** and the manufacturer side portion **523** or even a hardwired connection.

[0109] A bar code scanner **5214** is provided for scanning bar coded SKU and, preferably, serial numbers for returned products. Additionally, a printer **5216** is provided for printing transaction records and, if desired, printed versions of return authorizations from the manufacturer. As will be discussed below in greater detail, manually prepared return authorization forms may be used as an alternative to printed return authorizations.

[0110] The manufacturer side portion **521** includes a computer system **5230** utilizing, for example, an IBM AS/400 computer and having an associated data storage unit **5234** for storing an electronic product registration database. The manufacturer side computer system **5230** is capable of communicating with the return side portion **521** over an internet connection though telephone connection **5232**. As noted previously, other communication techniques between the manufacturer side portion **523** and the return side portion **521** may also be utilized.

[0111] After the regional retailer return facility receives products for return to the manufacturer, the return side portion **521** may access the manufacturer side portion **523** to screen the products for compliance with return requirements and to obtain pre-authorization of the returns. In particular, the return side computer **5210** connects to the manufacturer side computer **5230** by way of the internet or through other appropriate communication techniques. In the present example embodiment, the manufacturer side computer maintains a world wide web page for access by the regional return center. Password protection may be provided to ensure only authorized retailers are able to access return pre-authorization features in accordance with the present invention. For example, each return center location that is permitted access to the pre-authorization features may be assigned a location identification code and a password. In such a case, both the location identification code and the password would be required before access is granted to the product return screening program.

[0112] **FIG. 9** is a logic flow chart for the manufacturer side computer **5230** in screening returned products and processing pre-authorization requests from the regional return center. As indicated in the top portion of **FIG. 9**, the user first enters the appropriate location identification code and password. **FIG. 10A** illustrates a screen which may be displayed at the return side computer to prompt the user to enter the location identification and password. Once this information is received by the manufacturer side computer, the password is validated at function block **5302**. If desired, appropriate application maintenance procedures may be implemented upon validation of the password.

[0113] Upon verification of the location identification code and the password, the manufacturer side computer **5230** may cause a screen such as is illustrated in **FIG. 10B** to be displayed at the return side computer **5210**. As shown in **FIG. 10B**, existing batches saved in memory at the manufacturer side computer **5230** are listed. Existing batches are those for which return products have been scanned, but which have not yet been submitted for return authorization. Preferably, items can only be added or deleted from a batch up to the time that the batch is submitted for return authorization. In the present example implementation of the invention, once the batch is submitted for return authorization, it will no longer be displayed on the batch status screen, but can be viewed from the RA Status screen described below in connection with **FIG. 10H**.

[0114] It is possible to display a number of information items on the batch status screen in addition to the batch number. For example, the batch status screen shown in **FIG. 10B** displays the date and time the batch was opened, the total number of products that have been screened for return validation, the number of accepted items, and the number of rejected items. Of course, additional information could be displayed if desired.

[0115] A number of options are offered to the return center operator on the batch status screen illustrated in **FIG. 10B**. In particular, the return center operator may open an existing batch, create a new batch, or submit a batch to the manufacturer for return authorization. To open an existing batch, the desired batch may be selected in a conventional fashion by using a mouse to highlight the batch number and then clicking on the "Open Batch" button. Similarly, a highlighted batch may be submitted for return authorization by clicking the "Submit RA" button. A new batch can be created by clicking the "New Batch" button.

[0116] Preferably, a batch must be set up prior to screening returned products for return authorization. Depending on user preference, the return center operator may establish a new batch for each pallet of returned products that is screened for return authorization, each bill of lading, or based on the date that the products are scanned. It is not necessary to limit the number of products that can be scanned for each batch.

[0117] Referring again to **FIG. 9**, when the return center operator either opens an existing batch or creates a new batch, control passes to function block **5304**. For a new batch, the manufacturer side computer **5230** creates a batch header which includes information identifying the assigned batch number, any customer reference numbers, the return center address, the name and telephone number of a customer contact person, and the status of the batch (e.g., product entry stage, pending approval, approved, declined, RA assigned, etc.). A new batch number will be assigned each time "New Batch" is selected. If an existing batch is opened, the header information is retrieved from memory associated with the manufacturer side computer **5230**.

[0118] Once a batch is opened, the system is now ready to screen returned products. Depending on the type of product

for which return authorization is sought, the return center operator selects either "Scan Hardware" or "Scan Accessories" by clicking the appropriate button (**FIG. 10B**).

[0119] Referring now to **FIG. 10**C, to screen hardware product returns for compliance with return criteria, the return center operator is prompted to enter the UPC number for the product, the product serial number, and a store reference code (if desired). This information may be entered by scanning bar codes on the product with wedge scanner **5214** (**FIG. 8**), or alternatively by typing the information on the keyboard associated with return side computer **5210**. Other appropriate techniques may be employed as well. The user may then click the "Validate" button to instruct the manufacturer side computer **5230** to screen the product for return approval.

[0120] As shown in **FIG. 10**C, the Scan Hardware screen then displays the submitted information including the UPC code, the serial number, a description of the product, the date and time it was entered, and the store reference if any. Again, other items could be displayed if desired.

[0121] Although various techniques may be used for validating the screened products for compliance with return criteria, the system preferably uses data collected by an ERS as described above. In other words, while the above description of this retailer/manufacturer return system indicates that the manufacturer has a product registration database, this database may be based on information collected by the central database of multi-vendor ERS system as described above. Briefly, such an electronic registration system establishes a database which then may be accessed at the time of product return to determine the date of original sale and other information pertinent to determining whether return requirements are met. It is noted that, for a return to be properly accepted by a manufacturer, the product must not only be returned by the customer to the retailer within the specified return period, but it also must be returned by the retailer to the manufacturer within this specified period. Thus, this retailer/manufacturer feature of the ERS system is used to verify the latter.

[0122] When the manufacturer side computer **5230** receives UPC and serial number information for return validation, control passes to function block **5306** of **FIG. 9**. The manufacturer side computer **5230** then checks the electronic registration database to ensure that the identified product meets product return criteria, and posts the scanned information to a batch detail file. The batch detail file preferably includes the UPC number, the serial number, an indication of product quantity, and status (e.g., pending approval, approval good, error, or approval declined). The electronic registration database may then be edited to indicate that the product identified by the UPC code (function block **5308**) and serial number (function block **5310**) has been screened for return. Accordingly, the manufacturer side computer **5230** can keep track of products that have already been screened to avoid multiple submissions of a single product for return.

[0123] There may be a number of reasons a product will not qualify for return credit or replacement. For example, the warranty period may have expired, the serial number might not have been registered, an invalid serial number may have been received, the packaging may be missing, a major component of the product may be missing, or the item might be non-returnable as part of the conditions of sale. If the product does not qualify for return, the return center, such as the retailer regional warehouse, can retain the rejected product rather than ship it to the manufacturer, thereby saving the cost of freight for shipping a product that does not qualify for credit.

[0124] A note is displayed across the bottom of the screen of the Scan Hardware screen when a hardware unit does not qualify for return. The displayed message is preferably for the last item scanned. If the return center operator would like to review the reason a previously scanned item did not qualify for return credit, the operator may select "Actions" from the screen menu to see a list of available options. The operator may then select "Reasons" to see a description of the reason the unit was rejected. An example of a displayed reject reason is shown in **FIG. 10D**. Scanning may be resumed by pressing the <Esc> key on the return side computer keyboard to close the menu screen. The scanning process is repeated for each hardware item for which screening is sought.

[0125] Ideally, the return center operator stacks returnable items **1103** qualifying for return on a shipping pallet **1101** or the like (see **FIG. 11**). Non-qualifying items should be stacked on a separate pallet. It will then be unnecessary for return center personnel to later sort through the products a second time to separate qualifying products from non-qualifying products.

[0126] The Scan Accessories display screen is illustrated in **FIG. 10E**. The return center operator is prompted to enter the quantity of the accessory that is to be scanned. For example, if return authorization is to be requested for three VHS cables, the operator will input "3" and then use the <TAB> button on the return side computer keyboard to advance the cursor to the UPC Number field. The UPC number may then be scanned or entered manually on the keyboard. If a Store Reference code is used it may be entered prior to clicking the "Validate" button.

[0127] Once pre-screening is completed for the hardware and accessories, the return center operator may move back to the "Batch Status" screen. The batch may then be submitted for return authorization by clicking the "Submit RA" button. Referring now to **FIG. 10**F, the return center operator is preferably prompted to enter the name and phone number of the person who should be contacted with information or questions concerning the return authorization request. If desired, a customer reference number (e.g., a bill of lading number, file number, invoice number, etc.) may be entered for an internal reference to identify the return authorization. If the information on the screen is not filled in or "Cancel" is selected, the batch will not be submitted for return authorization. However, the batch will continue to be visible from the "Batch Status" screen.

[0128] Referring again to **FIG. 9**, control goes to function block **5312** upon submission of a return authorization request. First, the return center operator is asked to verify the contact information. An example of an appropriate contact verification screen for display on the return side computer **5210** is shown in **FIG. 10G**. If the contact information is verified, the manufacturer side computer **5230** re-validates the good scans included in the submitted batch. Control then proceeds to function block **5314**. If the good scans fail re-validation, control proceeds to function block **5316**,

which flags the batch header with an error indication, and notifies the return center operator of the failure. Otherwise, control proceeds to function block **5318** for automated approval.

[0129] Function block **5320** checks to determine whether the automated approval process was successful. If not, an e-mail message may be sent to a manufacturer's representative for the particular return center (function block **5322**). The return authorization request may then be reviewed manually to determine whether the request should be approved (function block **5324**). If the manual review shows that the request was properly rejected, the batch is flagged with an indication that the request was rejected, and the return center is notified of the rejection (function block **5326**). However, if the request is approved, control passes to function block **5328** to create a return authorization number and update the batch header to indicate the approved status. As indicated in **FIG. 9**, control may also pass to function block **5328** by way of function block **5320** if the automated approval process is successful.

[0130] **FIG. 10H** illustrates an example of an RA Status display screen which may be used to inform the return center operator of the status of an RA request. As shown, the RA Status screen lists the authorization status (e.g., pending, approved, rejected), the batch number, the customer reference number if any, the number of scans in the batch, the submission date, the approval date if applicable, the RA number if applicable, and the expiration date by which the return must be completed.

[0131] Once the RA has been submitted and approved, the system may also provide the dollar value of the product that is authorized for return. This dollar value may be based on the lower of (1) the gross invoice price paid by the Dealer for the product, less the value of all allowances and incentives given to the Dealer, or (2) the vendor's net product pricing at the time of the return. In most cases, the dealer may deduct the monetary value of authorized returns from any existing or future vendor invoices. Additionally, the system can be configured to comply with a vendor's specific returns policy and guidelines.

[0132] The RA number should be placed on the products prior to shipping to the manufacturer for credit. Referring now to **FIGS. 11 and 11A**, the RA number listed on the RA Status display screen may be written on an adhesive label **1105** supplied by the manufacturer along with the customer reference number (if applicable). Alternatively, the printer **5216 (FIG. 8)** may be used to print labels upon receipt of a return authorization number. Such labels are preferably placed on all four sides of the shipping pallet, the pallet is shrink wrapped and shipped to the manufacturer. The pallet should be shipped immediately to guard against expiration of product return dates. Of course, other shipping containers may be used as well.

[0133] The return authorization labels **1105** provide an easy reference to personnel at the manufacturer warehouse and permit simple and efficient processing of the returned products. Because the returned products are received in a batch and have been pre-approved for return credit, less work is required in reviewing the returned products to verify compliance with return criteria. As a result, the resources required to process the shipment are reduced, and the manufacturer is able to more quickly credit the return center for the returned products.

[0134] As explained above, this exemplary retailer/manufacturer returns feature of the ERS system simplifies and improves the returns process between a retailer and a manufacturer. The instant invention, however, is particularly advantageous when used at the consumer/retail level to prevent acceptance of unauthorized returns to retailers by consumers. This retailer/consumer feature of the instant invention will now be described in greater detail below.

[0135] Referring now to **FIGS. 12, 12A, 12B** and **13**, in accordance with one aspect of the present invention, a computer based system provides a method for real-time data storage and retrieval for the purpose of verifying and validating specific sales transaction data and product returns/warranty repair eligibility at the point of sale (POS) or retail location at which the consumer brings the product for return. Sales transaction information provided by this system may include SKU or UPC number, product serial number, date of purchase, place of purchase, register transaction number, payment information, return-to-vendor status, repair warranty status, authorized repair center location and phone number, estimated distance from consumer to repair location, repair prices, and any other suitable information as desired by the retailer and/or vendor.

[0136] The sales and returns verification system illustrated in **FIGS. 12, 12A, 12B** and **13**, preferably makes use of and incorporates POS electronic registration technology at the point of sale register, where the product's SKU or UPC is linked to the product's serial number, forming a unique identifier. Additional point of sale data (as determined by the retailer and/or vendor) can now be attached to this unique identifier and stored and/or transmitted and stored in a central database for future reference. Once the connection is made between the retailer and the vendor or third party service provider, additional services, such as credit card authorization or check verification, can be provided to the retailer.

[0137] In operation, the POS register may capture the UPC or SKU and the product's serial number to establish a unique identifier. Depending on the requirements of the particular retailer and/or vendor, additional data may be linked to the unique identifier and then transmitted. As explained above, the unique identifier may be determined in accordance with a mask and associated decoding information defined, for example, by the third party service provider and manufacturer.

[0138] If a transaction is paid by check or credit card, the check or credit card identification number may trigger the system to establish a connection with the third party service provider for credit card authorization or check verification. Once the POS register transaction is closed, the system stores and/or transmits and stores the unique identifier (UPC or SKU and Serial Number) along with the point of sale data as determined by the retailer and/or vendor.

[0139] The third party service provider acts as a central registration computer system (see, e.g., **FIG. 1**) and facilitates the link with the retailer. Credit card authorization or check verification data may be processed directly or through an approved financial institution. The financial institution/third party service provider returns a credit card authorization or check approval number.

[0140] The unique identifier (e.g., SKU or UPC and/or the product's serial number) along with the date of purchase and

any additional data linked to it is stored in a central database for future access. The central database preferably physically resides with the third party service provider. Alternatively, applicable portions of the central database can reside with the respective vendors as explained above.

[0141] When a consumer returns a product to the retailer, the store associate scans or otherwise enters the product's UPC or SKU, the product's serial number and, preferably, the customer's zip code. The system transmits this information to the third party service provider (or manufacturer) where certain data resides in a central database from the initial POS transaction and electronic registration as explained above.

[0142] The information is processed in accordance with the retailer and manufacturer's returns policy terms and conditions (each retailer and manufacturer is preferably responsible for updating its own returns policy and product warranties via a remote log in password). The manufacturer's warranty repair policy is also taken into account, as well as repair localities, including the repair center's address, phone number, approximate repair charges, etc. The system can also accommodate multiple (different) returns policies and repair warranties for the same manufacturer. This feature will help to satisfy contractual agreements for specific retailer customers.

[0143] Additional POS information (form of payment, price, etc.) as determined by the retailer and manufacturer may also be stored and linked to this product and/or sales transaction. In some instances, where the manufacturer has more stringent returns policies, the manufacturer may populate and store the product serial numbers at the time when products are shipped (sell-in) to the retailer. When the product is sold by the retailer (sell-through) the serial number is retransmitted and the records updated at the third party's database. This feature allows the manufacturer to track specific products with unique warranties and/or returns privileges.

[0144] Once the information is processed, it is transmitted back to the retailer (along with a transaction record number RA) and presented in the form of an on-screen menu option(s) with predetermined (canned) text message(s). The retailer associate and/or the customer select the most appropriate option (repair, return/refund or return/exchange, etc.). If the customer selects the return/exchange option, the system prompts the store associate to scan the replacement product's serial number. A hard copy, in the form of a receipt or an expanded version, detailing the transaction (repair information, etc.) may be printed for the customer as well as for the retailer's material move records.

[0145] The transaction may then be closed and the final information (customer selection) is retransmitted, linked to the product record and stored for future use by the manufacturer, retailer, and or third party service provider. The system updates the original records according to which option the consumer exercised. If the repair option was selected the system voids the RA transaction number. In case of a return/exchange transaction, the system updates the record with the replacement product serial number. It is noted that with most manufacturers, the replacement product's warranty expiration date coincides with the original warranty expiration date.

[0146] Referring to **FIG. 12**, a third party service provider **1001** operates a central registration computer system for the benefit of a number of retailers **1003** and vendors **1005**. The use of an independent service provider **1001** may be beneficial in encouraging retailers and vendors to utilize the transaction registration services. In addition to the retailers **1003** and vendors **1005**, a number of other users **1007** may access the third party service provider system through, for example, a modem or internet connection, by way of a toll free **800** telephone number, or other appropriate means. These other users **1007** may include, for example, law enforcement agencies, loss prevention and insurance groups, third party reverse logistics providers, third party warranty providers, third party groups that provide sell through reporting, authorized service centers and others. In other words, the information stored by third party service providers can be used for other applications in addition to the validation of returns.

[0147] Law enforcement agencies may, for example, access the central database to locate information regarding recovered stolen property. Thus, the rightful owner of a recovered property may be readily located. Additionally, locating the rightful owner may provide law enforcement agencies with leads to assist criminal investigations by, for example, helping determine the location from which stolen goods originated. Similarly, insurance carriers and loss prevention groups may be given access to the database to verify sales information and help guard against fraudulent claims.

[0148] Customer information such as name, area code and the like is typically not gathered at point of sale. Accordingly, a vendor may include a registration card with the product which may be filled in by the customer and forwarded to the vendor or the third party service provider. The information from the product registration card may then be appended to the transaction record to provide corresponding customer information. Of course, in lieu of a mail-in product registration card, it is also possible to permit on-line registration, telephone registration, or other available forms of registration. Of course, any such form of registration should require a sufficient indication of information that can be used to verify that the transaction is being registered to a rightful purchaser.

[0149] **FIG. 15** schematically illustrates a process that may be used for on-line consumer post-sale registration. To ensure that the post-sale registration is being made by a proper customer, the process goes through an initial validation stage to verify information that would be known to a proper customer and which is already available to the central registration system by virtue of the previous POS or e-tailer transaction registration. For example, the consumer may be prompted to enter the brand name of the product (step **1501**), the store at which the product was purchased (step **1502**), the purchase date (step **1503**), the product serial number (step **1504**), and the product description (step **1505**). Correct responses (or at least nearly correct responses) to these inquiries permit the user to proceed to the second stage of the post-sale registration wherein the consumers name, address, phone number and other suitable information is obtained and stored with a link to the product information. Of course, adequate steps should be taken to ensure consumer privacy.

[0150] As shown in **FIG. 12**, at the point of sale (POS), the retailer may transmit applicable information to the third

party service provider **1001** to be included in a multi-vendor database **1009**. If desired, the central registration computer system may include a database **1011** for use in verifying credit card or check transactions. If this capability is used, the third party service provider may return a credit card or check approval number at the time of the sale. Additionally, a database **1013** may be provided for information pertaining to the return policies of particular retailers and vendors.

[0151] The system permits customer service requests (CSR) upon receipt of applicable information such as a UPC number, serial number, or customer zip code. In response to a CSR, the third party service provider will return pertinent information such as the purchase date, return status in view of the applicable return policies, a return authorization number if appropriate, warranty/repair information such as a list of authorized repair centers, or other information. For example, user tips may be downloaded to assist a customer in diagnosing a problem, properly connecting electronic equipment, etc. Such information may be included in a local retailer database, a third party service provider database, or a manufacturer database. The third party service provider and manufacturer databases are preferably available seven days a week, and 24 hours a day.

[0152] **FIG. 12A** further illustrates a preferred operation of the system illustrated in **FIG. 12** during electronic product registration. **FIG. 12B** further illustrates a preferred operation of the system illustrated in **FIG. 12** during a product return transaction.

[0153] Turning now to **FIG. 13**, the third party service provider system may include retailer and manufacturer validation tables containing specific return policy information. Maintenance of these validation tables is preferably the responsibility of the individual retailer, manufacturer or other party. In other words, the retailers and manufacturers are provided with access to these validation tables so that they may provide and update the applicable return criterias for their products.

[0154] In addition, a retailer may access records in separate manufacturer databases at the third party service provider to obtain selected predefined or ad hoc management reporting. For example, a retailer may monitor returns accepted by an individual clerk to determine whether the clerk has an unusually high (and possibly fraudulent) return rate. Of course, the third party service provider should maintain security measures to ensure that the retailer can access only records to which it is entitled access. For example, a retailer would be prevented from running reports on sales by a competitor.

[0155] Similarly, the manufacturer may run predefined or ad hoc reports to monitor sales activities. Such reports may be useful, for example, in determining which products are selling well and, therefore, whether production or shipping of these products should be increased. Again, a manufacturer would not be given access to competitors' sales information.

[0156] **FIG. 14** is an application overview of the components and functions of the central registration computer system. As shown, the central registration computer system may perform a number of system functions. These system functions include application services, database services, electronic data interchange (EDI), batch services, VRU services, collaboration services, RMI/IIOP services, e-mail services, directory services, encryption services, VPN service, load balancing services, systems management services, reporting tools, site analysis services, and HTTP services.

[0157] Application services allow the handling of server-side processing on a world wide web server. This is important to meter traffic to the databases. It also allows for fail over if applications are not available. It also allows for session tracking and extra security. Database services handle the storage and retrieval of the central registration computer system data. This can be important for the speed and integrity of data storage and access. It also can allow the synchronization of data across multiple databases and data-centers. EDI is an application that allows the mapping and conversion of data from the central registration computer system database and converts it to the industry standard Electronic Data Interchange (EDI) documents. It also processes EDI documents and will place the results in the database. EDI handles the communications of data to and from value-added-network electronic mail boxes. Batch services support the set of processes that allow the scheduling and logging of jobs that may be run as part of the system. This includes scheduling transfers of data, cleanup processes, database conversions, content updates, alert triggers, audit processes, etc.

[0158] VRU services is the set of telephony services that allow the system to implement applications on the database. This can support applications that allow retailers at the point of return to check returns verification status and warranty information. Collaboration services allow accounts and central system personnel to communicate real-time and provides for on-line customer service to help decrease costs, decrease time to handle service requirements, and increase the level of customer satisfaction. RMI service allows for remote execution of transactions between central system applications and its accounts, and can be one of the ways to process data exchange, and execute electronic registration or returns verification transactions. E-mail services can facilitate the processing of e-mail between the central system and the accounts (vendors, retailers, service centers). It can include hosting of e-mail services for those accounts who do not have their own Internet Service Provider (ISP) and can also handle consumer accounts (if needed).

[0159] Directory services are the systems services that allow a standard technique for storing, using, and accessing user-centric information. This database can drive the user data for the central system web, e-mail, and collaboration services, and can also serve as the basis of central system security. Encryption services allow the central system to encrypt (secure) data that is transferred over the Internet. This could be important for securing non-private network datafiles. This service also includes management/publishing/serving of the public key associated with the central system. VPN services allow the central system and its retailer accounts to establish a private communications channel on the Internet, and may be implemented at the hardware or software level. It can be very important to maintain security on the Internet, yet allow transactions to perform up to requirements. Load balancing services route transaction traffic to appropriate services, systems, and sites (data center) depending on system availability, performance, and location of the request. This can be important because it allows a transaction to continue if a site or host is down, and ensures that the system is always available.

[0160] Systems management services monitor the availability, security, and performance of the central system applications. It also can allow the central system to escalate problems if they are not resolved in a timely manner, and can allow the central system to manage the network and host functions in addition to the data center. Reporting tools allow authorized central system accounts and central system personnel to easily access the database. This will allow ad hoc analysis of data for an account and will allow straightforward deployment of new reports. Site analysis tools allow the central system to analyze its world wide web traffic. This includes the overall amount of traffic to the site or to specific sections of site. It can allow the central system to see where the traffic is coming from and what type of browser is being used. It can also allow the consolidation of log reporting across several hosts. HTTP services is what is typically referred to as a web server. These are the services that allow the central system to handle Internet browser access. It can serve and secure static content and hand off dynamic content requests. It also can allow for intuitive links to FTP services.

[0161] The central registration computer system also includes a number of semi-private support components such as data exchange, a communications menu system, alerts, reporting services, and project tracking and user help. Additionally, a number of semi-private core components are provided, including account maintenance, product maintenance, warranty maintenance, electronic registration, serial number maintenance, returns verification, returns prescreening, warranty inquiry and consumer registration. Although these items require authorized access, they may be shared by a number of individual users and are therefore semi-private.

[0162] The Account Maintenance core component allows the central system to setup an account for either a retailer or vendor. Account setup covers such areas as contact, relationship and equity, account type, user information and authorities. This preferably includes account profile maintenance to maintain account information for each customer; contact/user maintenance to setup and maintain contacts/users for each account (user default and specific authorities may be assigned here); authority group maintenance to maintain various authority lists which are assigned to various groups or account types; account contract/relationship maintenance to track contracts, equity, correspondence for each account; and retailer location maintenance which allows for the maintenance of each retail store location. The product maintenance component allows the retailer, vendor, and the central system to maintain and distribute product information. Retailer/Vendor UPC maintenance allows maintenance of product information at the UPC level. Kit maintenance cross references to store pre-loaded serial numbers that go together in each "kit" shipped. Product type maintenance allows a vendor to define groupings of their products (e.g., TV, VCR).

[0163] The warranty maintenance component allows the vendor to set up return and repair warranty information for each of its products. Policies can be set up at the product or product type levels. Warranty maintenance sets up and maintains return and repair warranties. Reason code maintenance maintains codes by product type to indicate the reason a product is returned. The electronic registration component allows the central system to collect product registration data from the retailer. This may include several interfaces to collect this data—EDI to support legacy implementation, and a real-time interface to support ongoing implementations. Registration transmission is a request from a retailer to the central system to register a product as sold. A registration transmission processor is a processing program at the central system that contains all the edits necessary to process the incoming registration transmission and send back the confirmation transmission when appropriate. An internal registration audit may provide an on-line interface which will display transmission errors that need to be reviewed and fixed before registration is accepted. A registration confirmation may be transmitted from the central system back to retailer to confirm that the registration was received. A pre-sell product registration may be used to register a product that is sold through catalog sales, or to indicate product as sold to a particular retailer for establishing special return policies.

[0164] The serial number maintenance component can be used to maintain and view serial number registration information (returns and warranty expiration dates). It can also be used to maintain exceptional situations such as an indication that the serial number was stolen. On-line serial number maintenance may be used to allow an account to view and/or update (depending on authorization) specific information about a registered serial number. Stolen serial number maintenance allows an account to update a specific serial number as stolen. Serial number manual registration allows for registration (pre-sell and POS) of a range of serial numbers without scanning or other electronic interface. Serial number history allows for the inquiry of all activity against a specific serial number. The returns verification component provides the retailer or return center with the ability to verify that a product is eligible for return. A confirmation will be transmitted back which contains a return authorization code or message, return-by date, and repair warranty information if requested. A return verification request may go from a retailer or return center to the central system. A return verification processor may be used to edit and process the data sent in and to send confirmation data back. A return eligibility confirmation can be transmitted from the central system back to the retailer to verify the product is eligible for return.

[0165] The returns prescreen component permits verification of whether or not a product is returnable to the vendor just prior to shipping. This system may be required to ensure that the product being sent back to the vendor will qualify for credit when it reaches the vendor. This is particularly important for those retailers who use returns centers to consolidate returns. The warranty inquiry component allows an authorized service center to access information regarding a product's repair warranty. Access to this information is preferably through a web interface or through the VRU. A product warranty inquiry allows access to a product's repair warranty information. The consumer post-sale registration component gives consumers the ability to register a product against the central system account. This will allow consumers to have a record at the central system of the serialized products they have purchased. Also it will allow law enforcement agents a means to contact the purchasing consumer for stolen products. This component includes consumer account setup, consumer serial number registration, law agent access, and provision of a consumer web site.

[0166] With regard to the semi-private support components, the data exchange component allows for the exchange

of data between the central system and the accounts (vendors or retailers). Data exchange key maintenance maintains multiple user id/password combinations to support different ways of communicating with the account. For each account, data exchange subscription maintenance maintains which types of data will be sent to their systems using the data exchange mechanism. Startup services are the processes used to support the initial loading of the account's data into the central system database. Vendor/Retailer data exchange are the processes that set up and control the exchange of data with accounts. Product maintenance push will allow the movement of the product file information to the retailer with little development on the retailer's part. This will include only information needed to drive POS terminals for each retailer. The data exchange file generator are the programs that generate the different types of files that contain the different types of data. The Internet menu system component is what an individual user (central system employees, accounts, and consumers) will see when they log onto the system. It will be used by the central system personnel (intranet) and the vendors, retailers, and service centers (extranet) that have access to the central system. Account application maintenance defines which applications will appear on each account's "menu" based on user access rights. Application billing structure maintenance defines the pricing structure associated with a particular application/account combination.

[0167] The alerts messaging component provides a facility to send alert messages generated from various processes throughout the system. Alert maintenance is a process to set up the type of alerts an account would like to receive. An alert processor may be provided to process and send the alerts. The reporting component provides the account with various standard reports for tracking electronic registrations and return verification data. For example, an electronic registration summary report can be provided to summarize all registration information. An abuse audit report can be used to identify patterns of abuse based on warranty setup. A returns reconciliation report can show the history of registrations including any return request activity. A returns to registration audit report can show percentage of returns compared with registrations. A returns verification request summary report can show total return verification requests by return code. The project tracking/help desk component provides information exchange between the account and the central system regarding new account setup, bug fixes, and other pertinent information. Information exchange/project tracking can provide an ability to track projects and problems, and to exchange other information with the account. Time tracking can provide the ability to track time against projects such as custom reports and other enhancements specific to an account. A help desk facility could incorporate the problem tracking portion of the information exchange.

[0168] Private support components include audit maintenance, billing system interface, and purge setup/processing. The audit maintenance component can provide various audits on activity against the central system database. These audits can be used internally by the central system for tracking an account's usage of the system. An audit activity log can track specific types of activity against the serial number database. The billing system interface component provides processes for approving the billing of accounts for the central system services. The actual invoicing and fund collection may be provided by a standard accounts receivable software package. Billing structure maintenance may provide information on how each account will be billed. Billing approval can provide an interface for approval of the billing before actual invoicing. Finally, the purge setup/processing component includes the processes and supporting information that will allow the central system to purge appropriate data from the system. Purge processing may summarize transactional data, save to other media (tape, CD, optical), and purge data based on time defaults set at the account level.

[0169] Turning now to **FIGS. 16A through 16G**, a user at a retail store may access the central registration computer system to make a customer service request. Upon access, a main menu is displayed which provides the user with options to request return/warranty information, operating/hook-up instructions, vendor/product information, or other information. **FIGS. 16A through 16B** illustrate a series of interactive customer interface screens that may be displayed upon selection of return/warranty information.

[0170] As illustrated in **FIG. 16B**, the user may, for example, be prompted to input the product UPC number, the product serial number and the customer's zip code. This information is then transmitted to the third party host system of the centralized database to be used in accessing the pertinent database record. The user may also be requested to input a reason for the return/warranty inquiry.

[0171] **FIG. 16C** shows information that may be returned to the retailer by the third party host system. In particular, the host system may return additional details concerning the original transaction as well as a list of customer options. The list of customer options may be determined by the host system in light of the applicable retailer and/or manufacturer warranty information included within the validation tables **1013** (see **FIG. 13**).

[0172] Turning now to **FIGS. 16D through 16G**, the retailer selects the option chosen by the customer by clicking on the appropriate choice. The host system then returns pertinent information relevant to the selected option. For example, if free warranty repair is selected, a list of local authorized repair shops may be listed. This list may be printed and provided to the customer by the retailer store. If the customer selects a product exchange, the retailer may be prompted to enter the serial number of the replacement product so that the central registration database may be updated accordingly. Similarly, the host system will update the registration database to reflect a return for in-store credit or refund.

[0173] Customer problems with products often are not the result of defects in the product, but rather may simply be the result of a lack of knowledge by the customer on the proper operation or hook-up of the product. Accordingly, the retailer may request information from the host system to assist the customer in the proper operation or hookup of the product. Such information is preferably stored in an appropriate host system database. For example, a manufacturer may download instructions into the database for this purpose. The manufacturer ideally bears the responsibility of ensuring the information is kept current. As an alternative, the host system may access a manufacturer database to obtain this information when requested.

[0174] **FIGS. 17A through 17H** illustrate interactive user interface display screens that may be utilized when a cus-

tomer chooses to obtain operating/hookup instructions. As shown in **FIG. 17B**, the user is prompted to enter the UPC number or the vendor name and model number. If the vendor name/model number option is used, the host system may be programmed to recognize the vendor name based upon the first few characters. For example, once a user enters "NINT", the system may recognize the vendor as NINTENDO, as illustrated in **FIG. 17C**. Once the vendor name is recognized or completely input, a pull down menu of possible model numbers may be provided for user selection, as shown in **FIG. 17D**.

[0175] Referring to **FIG. 17E**, the user is then prompted to select information on either the operation or proper hook-up of the product. In this example, the user selects hook-up information. The host system then displays appropriate hook-up information (**FIG. 17F**), which may be printed for the customer. Similarly, **FIGS. 17G and 17H** illustrate the interactive screen displays if operation instructions are requested. As shown in **FIG. 17G**, the user may be prompted to enter additional information concerning the particular operation of interest, for example, how to set the clock, how to record, how to edit, etc. Again, the appropriate information concerning the customer inquiry then may be displayed and printed.

[0176] **FIGS. 18A through 18F** show interactive screens that may be displayed when the user selects vendor/product information. The user would again be prompted to enter sufficient information for the host system to determine which records to access, as described above in connection with **FIGS. 17B through 17D**. Pertinent information concerning the vendor (**FIG. 18B**) or the product (**FIG. 18C**) may then be displayed. This vendor information may be useful to the retailer, for example, to contact the manufacturer with questions or to provide the customer with a manufacturer customer service phone number. The product information may be used, for example, to verify what components were sold with the products so that the retailer can verify the return of all major components. If desired, the retailer may also return to the main menu to obtain further information concerning proper hook-up or operation of the product, as illustrated in **FIGS. 18D through 18F**.

[0177] Referring now to **FIG. 19**, in accordance with an important aspect of the present invention, a return authorization engine is provided for use directly by customers or purchasers of products. While this feature of the invention is particularly advantageous when used in connection with the return of products purchased on-line from e-tailers, it may also be used to enable consumers to initiate their own returns from products purchased from conventional retail locations as well.

[0178] In a preferred embodiment, a Web site is provided which can be accessed by the customer via an Internet connection or the like. **FIG. 19** shows an overview of the main components and flow of this aspect of the invention. The customer accesses the web site **1902** and enters information related to the return, such as a serial number of the product to be returned. The Web site can request any suitable information to be entered by the customer, such as name, address, place of purchase, date of purchase etc. However, if the product is a serialized product (i.e. a product that has been previously registered in the transaction database (electronic registration (ER)) in the manner described above, then all that is needed is the serial number in order to provide the customer with information on return qualification and return procedures. The serial number is then used to access the ER database to determine if the product qualifies for return based on the applicable return criteria. If the product does qualify for return, the customer is given a return authorization (RA) number and return instructions. The RA and return instructions can be printed at the customer's computer used to access the Web site. The return instructions preferably include shipping instructions indicating where and how the product should be shipped for the return. The system may also tell the customer who to expect a refund or exchange from and how long it will take.

[0179] Once the vendor or other designated party receives the product at the return center **1906**, the vendor would then provide a confirmation to the ER database system **1904** that the product has been returned. The database system **1904** would then notify the e-tailer or any other appropriate party involved in the transaction to issue a refund to the customer or provide an exchange depending on the particular circumstances of the particular transaction involved.

[0180] The above described embodiment provides numerous benefits. First, the customer is able to generate his/her own return authorization (RA), which saves the e-tailer, retailer or manufacturer from having to be involved in this process. In other words, the invention automates the return process thereby eliminating the need to provide, for example, call centers for returns. In addition, the product can be shipped directly to the manufacturer, thereby avoiding shipping and handling expenses for the retailer and delays by a third party service provider. The customer may also continuously track the return process on the Web site **1902** (e.g. RA received, product received by the manufacturer, check in process, check sent, etc.).

[0181] In accordance with a preferred embodiment of the invention, the Web site **1902** is linked directly to a shipper, such as UPS, FedEx or U.S. mail, to request a pickup for return or service of the product from the customer, thereby further automating the return process and further simplifying the return procedure for the consumer. The system also includes flexible default return policies (as described above) that can be defined and updated by retailers, e-tailers and/or manufacturers.

[0182] If the ER database determines that the product is not eligible for return the customer will be advised of this fact and preferably be given information about repair facilities that may be able to repair the product if desired and/or operating or hook-up instructions. The information that may be provided to the user is similar that that described above with respect to FIGS. **16A-18F**. In other words, this embodiment is similar to the in-store embodiment described above, except that the customer does not go to a store for the return. Thus, the description and exemplary screens discussed above regarding the physical retail embodiment are equally applicable to the direct consumer access embodiment now being described.

[0183] The instant invention provides a front-end clearing house (a centralized buffer between the customer and the various retailer/e-tailers) for the purpose of validating legitimate returns that comply with the retailer/e-tailer and/or manufacturer's returns policy and guidelines. Once the product is determined to be eligible for return (using the

product's unique identifier, such as serial number and the applicable return criteria) additional menus (similar to those described above with respect to the store embodiment) will appear to prompt the user for any additional desired information. This information may be, for example, personal information used to determine if the person attempting to return the product is, in fact, the rightful or original owner of the particular product and is eligible for a return credit. The system may consider the person attempting to return the product as the rightful purchaser by, for example, requesting the customer to enter information that the person who purchased the product should know, such as approximately when and where the product was purchased. The entered information can then be compared with the information in the ER database **1904** to make a determination if the return should be accepted by the particular person seeking to make the return. This screen may be similar to that shown in **FIG. 15** as described above. If the ER system determines that the product is eligible for return, the customer is provided with a pre-return return authorization (RA), as well as detailed instructions on where to ship the product, who to expect a refund from and the approximate processing time.

[0184] It is noted that when products are purchased on-line through an e-tailer, the transaction information for the ER database can be obtained any time during the fulfillment process. For example, the warehouse that ships the product could scan or otherwise obtain the unique identifier (e.g. serial number). This information can then be sent to the ER database together with information on the purchase date, so that the information can be matched with applicable return criteria and stored for later use with a possible return request for the product. When products are purchased on-line, the e-tailer typically would have the credit card or check information on the purchaser. This information can be used later by the e-tailer to issue a refund or credit after the system notifies the e-tailer that the product has been properly returned. However, if sufficient information is not available on the purchaser to provide a refund, the Web site may request all necessary information during the initial return authorization requesting procedure.

[0185] **FIG. 20** shows a sample screen that could be initially shown on the Web site **1902** for the purpose of asking if the product is a serialized or non-serialized product (i.e. was it previously registered with the ER system). If so, another screen, such as shown in **FIG. 21**, is then displayed to obtain the serial number and the place of purchase. If not serialized, the system would then provide information to the customer regarding returns of non-serialized products. For example, the system could automate whatever existing procedures the e-tailer or retailer has for accepting returns of such products.

[0186] In a preferred embodiment, the e-tailer would provide on its web site **1908** a link to the returns Web site **1902**, so that a customer who desires to return a product can access the original site where the product was purchased and then click on a banner, icon or the like to be redirected to the returns Web site **1902**.

[0187] Additional exemplary screens are shown in FIGS. **22-35**. **FIG. 22** shows an example where the product is good for return; **FIGS. 23 and 24** show examples where the product is not good for return with manager override; **FIGS. 25 and 26** show examples where the product is not good for return (less than extended period), good for warranty repair; **FIGS. 27 and 28** show examples where the product is not good for return (greater than extended period), good for warranty repair; **FIGS. 29 and 30** show examples where the product is not good for return (no override), not good for warranty repair with manager override; FIGS. **31-33** show examples where all product return periods have expired (no override), providing repair center lookup; **FIG. 34** shows an example where the product was manufactured by a non-participating manufacturer; and **FIG. 35** shows an example where there is a UPC/Serial Number mismatch between the product packaging and the product.

[0188] The implementations described above illustrate the characteristics, features and advantages of the present invention. These implementations, of course, are not exhaustive, and other implementations within the scope and spirit of the present invention will be apparent to those skilled in the art. Although the invention is described primarily in the context of a three-level customer/retailer/manufacturer arrangement, other arrangements are available. For example, a four-level consumer/individual chain store/store headquarters/manufacturer arrangement may be implemented. Yet further levels may be added.

[0189] While the invention has been described in connection with what is presently considered to be the most practical and preferred embodiments, it is to be understood that the invention is not to be limited to the disclosed embodiments, but on the contrary, is intended to cover various modifications and equivalent arrangements included within the spirit and scope of the appended claims.

What is claimed is:

1. A method of initiating and authorizing a product return over a global computer network, the method comprising:

(a) enabling input of identity information to identify a product being returned, the identity information including at least one product identifier that is unique to the product being returned;

(b) accessing a central database that stores a plurality of product identifiers and associated return information, and searching the central database for return information based on the at least one input product identifier;

(c) determining whether the product being returned qualifies for return based on the associated return information; and

(d) if the product being returned qualifies for return in step (c), providing a return authorization number and return instructions.

2. A method according to claim 1, wherein if the product being returned does not qualify for return in step (c), the method comprising (e) providing general product information.

3. A method according to claim 2, wherein the general product information comprises at least one of return policies, set-up information, repair information, warranty information, and service locations.

4. A method according to claim 2, wherein step (e) is practiced by transmitting the product information via the global computer network and displaying the general product information on a computer monitor.

5. A method according to claim 1, wherein step (d) is practiced by transmitting the return authorization number

and return instructions via the global computer network and displaying the return authorization number and return instructions on a computer monitor.

6. A method according to claim 1, wherein the return instructions comprise at least one of return shipping instructions, how and from where to expect a refund, how and from where to expect an exchange, and an estimated processing time.

7. A method according to claim 1, further comprising enabling tracking of the product return process.

8. A method according to claim 1, further comprising, after step (d), providing access to a qualified shipping merchant via the global network.

9. A method according to claim 1, wherein the product identifier is a product serial number.

10. A method according to claim 1, wherein the identity information further comprises personal information for authorizing the product return.

11. A method of processing a product return via a global computer network, the method comprising:

(a) storing return policies and guidelines for a plurality of products;

(b) accessing the stored return policies and guidelines according to a unique product identifier input by a user via the global network; and

(c) validating legitimate returns that comply with the respective return policies and guidelines according to the input product identifier.

12. A method according to claim 11, wherein the product identifier is a product serial number.

13. A method according to claim 11, wherein step (a) further comprises storing transaction information for the plurality of products.

14. A method according to claim 13, wherein the transaction information comprises at least one of the unique product identifier, a purchase date, a purchase amount, a purchase location, and payment information.

15. A computer system for initiating and authorizing a product return, the computer system comprising:

at least one user computer running a computer program that requests information according to at least one input product identifier; and

a system server running a server program, the at least one user computer and the system server being interconnected by a computer network, the system server sending the requested information according to the input product identifier by accessing a central database that stores a plurality of product identifiers and associated return information and by searching the central database for return information based on the at least one input product identifier, wherein the system server determines whether the product being returned qualifies for return based on the associated return information, and wherein if the product being returned qualifies for return, the system server provides a return authorization number and return instructions.

16. A computer program embodied on a computer-readable medium for initiating and authorizing a product return over a global computer network, the computer program comprising:

means for enabling input of identity information to identify a product being returned, the identity information including at least one product identifier that is unique to the product being returned;

means for accessing a central database that stores a plurality of product identifiers and associated return information, and means for searching the central database for return information based on the at least one input product identifier;

means for determining whether the product being returned qualifies for return based on the associated return information; and

means for providing a return authorization number and return instructions if the product being returned qualifies for return.

17. A computer system for processing a product return, the computer system comprising:

at least one user computer running a computer program that requests information according to at least one input product identifier; and

a system server running a server program, the at least one user computer and the system server being interconnected by a computer network, the system server storing return policies and guidelines for a plurality of products and sending the requested information by accessing the stored return policies and guidelines according to the input product identifier, wherein the system server validates legitimate returns that comply with the respective return policies and guidelines according to the input product identifier.

18. A computer program embodied on a computer-readable medium for initiating and authorizing a product return over a global computer network, the computer program comprising:

means for storing return policies and guidelines for a plurality of products;

means for accessing the stored return policies and guidelines according to a unique product identifier input by a user via the global network; and

means for validating legitimate returns that comply with the respective return policies and guidelines according to the input product identifier.

* * * * *

APPENDIX E

"J. Crew Selects Newgistics' ReturnValet Service for Managing Product Returns," Business Editors, Business Wire; January 14, 2002 ("*ReturnValet2*")

Business Wire
The Global Leader in News Distribution

J. Crew Selects Newgistics' ReturnValet Service for Managing Product Returns

Business Editors & High-Tech/Retail Writers. **Business Wire**. New York: Jan 14, 2002. pg. 1

Companies:	J Crew Group Inc, Newgistics Inc
Author(s):	Business Editors & High-Tech/Retail Writers
Publication title:	Business Wire. New York: Jan 14, 2002. pg. 1
Source type:	Wire feed
ProQuest document ID:	99505967
Text Word Count	586
Document URL:	http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=99505967&sid=1&Fmt=3&clientId=19649&RQT=309&VName=PQD

Abstract (Document Summary)

Newgistics Inc. (www.newgistics.com) is an innovative supply chain management company that integrates technology with established logistics systems to create operational efficiencies for multiple business verticals. Newgistics focuses on delivering reverse logistics solutions to optimize the entire supply chain. Newgistics formed strategic alliances with R. R. Donnelley Logistics (www.donnelleylogistics.com), USF Processors (www.usfprocessors.com), and Spiegel-Hermes General Service (www.shgs.com) to create the most extensive and comprehensive returns management network in the industry. Through its initial product offering, **ReturnValet**(tm), the four companies have signed agreements with more than 4,000 pack and ship centers nationwide to offer direct retailers a product returns solution that is both affordable and customer friendly.

Full Text (586 words)

AUSTIN, Texas--(BUSINESS WIRE)--Jan. 14, 2002--Newgistics Inc., a leading provider of reverse logistics solutions for the retail industry, today announced that J. Crew, a leading multi-channel retailer for apparel and accessories, signed a three-year agreement for its **ReturnValet**(tm) service.

Newgistics is the only returns outsourcing company operating today offering complete returns services from the

first point of customer contact to the final disposition of an item. **ReturnValet** service commenced Nov. 2001.

ⓘJ. Crew will first deploy **ReturnValet's** "Quick Label" program, which includes a pre-paid and pre-addressed "smart" shipping label enclosed with customers' merchandise. Customers returning merchandise to ⓘJ. Crew simply apply the label to their return package and drop it in the U.S. Postal System. The Quick Label also eliminates return merchandise authorizations, waiting in lines for mailing items and paying cash up front for product returns.

In a later phase, ⓘJ. Crew will also offer its customers access to **ReturnValet's** nationwide network of convenient neighborhood pack and ship locations for customers who prefer to hand off their merchandise to a person, get a credit receipt, and complete their return as they would in a store. Consumers should bring their invoice or gift receipt with their merchandise. ⓘJ. Crew will gain advance notification of incoming returns, expediting returns processing and credit and exchange transactions.

"We wanted to make our returns service even better by eliminating as many customer inconveniences as possible," said Walter Killough, chief operating officer of ⓘJ. Crew Group. "**ReturnValet** enhances our customer service while also creating operational efficiencies and savings for ⓘJ. Crew."

"In today's economic environment, those companies that provide a superior level of service to their customers will reap the benefits of customer loyalty," said Clarence "Gabe" Gabriel, Jr., president and CEO of ⓘNewgistics. "**ReturnValet** reduces a customer's time and hassle associated with remote shopping returns."

ⓘJ. Crew joins Spiegel Catalog, ⓘEddie Bauer, Newport News, ⓘLillian Vernon, Sincerely Yours and other retailers in offering the unique returns service to their customers.

ⓘJ. Crew Group Inc.

Headquartered in New York City, J.CREW GROUP Inc. is a leading specialty retailer offering a wide range of men's, women's and children's apparel, shoes, accessories and personal care products through its fast-expanding retail network of 133 stores in the U.S. and 76 licensed stores in Japan, its industry leading e-commerce site and its signature mail-order catalog. For more information, visit http://www.jcrew.com.

ReturnValet(tm)

ReturnValet(tm)(www.**returnvalet**.com) is a comprehensive returns management solution, including nationwide neighborhood return locations, integrated software and a complete network of shipping, warehouse, disposition and liquidation services that deliver improved operational efficiency, increased asset recovery and real-time business intelligence. Through the Newgistics **ReturnValet**(tm) program, consumers can easily return catalog and online merchandise purchases through two convenient methods: physical drop-off at one of more than 4,000 participating pack and ship centers nationwide or affix a pre-paid mailing label enclosed with their merchandise and drop it in the U.S. Postal Service system.

ⓘNewgistics Inc.

ⓘNewgistics Inc. (www.newgistics.com) is an innovative supply chain management company that integrates technology with established logistics systems to create operational efficiencies for multiple business verticals. Newgistics focuses on delivering reverse logistics solutions to optimize the entire supply chain. Newgistics formed strategic alliances with R. R. Donnelley Logistics (www.donnelleylogistics.com), USF Processors (www.usfprocessors.com), and Spiegel-Hermes General Service (www.shgs.com) to create the most extensive and comprehensive returns management network in the industry. Through its initial product offering, **ReturnValet**(tm), the four companies have signed agreements with more than 4,000 pack and ship centers nationwide to offer direct retailers a product returns solution that is both affordable and customer friendly.

Aut hor(s): Business Editors & High-Tech/Retail Writers

Language: English

Publication title: Business Wire

Search Clear

---

^ Back to Top « Back to Results < Previous Document 12 of 35 Next > Publisher Information

Print Email Mark Document Abstract , Full Text

APPENDIX F

Evidence Appendix

Other than the references attached to this Appeal Brief as Appendices B-D, no evidence was submitted pursuant to 37 C.F.R. §§ 1.130, 1.131, or 1.132, and no other evidence was entered by the Examiner and relied upon by Appellants in the Appeal.

APPENDIX G

Related Proceedings Appendix

As stated on Page 3 of this Appeal Brief, to the knowledge of Appellants' Counsel, there are no known appeals, interferences, or judicial proceedings that will directly affect or be directly affected by or have a bearing on the Board's decision regarding this Appeal.